

# EAST COAST SHELLFISH GROWERS ASSOCIATION

## 2025 Walk on the Hill: New Challenges, New Opportunities

by Robert B. Rheault,  
ECSGA Executive Director

Early May of 2025 proved to be an interesting time to visit Washington, D.C. With just 100 days of the Trump administration under our belts we already had witnessed mass retirements, on-again-off-again tariffs, and massive layoffs of government workers. While there was still considerable uncertainty about the fate of various government programs we rely on, we still felt it was imperative to make our priorities known to our elected representatives. With that goal in mind, 10 ECSGA members and I visited 40 House and Senate offices, and met with officials from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), and the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative.

We carried a clear message to everyone we spoke with: If this administration is seriously concerned about reducing the more than \$20 billion trade deficit in seafood products, the shellfish aquaculture industry can be part of the solution. Although we can't catch more fish if we want to save the resource for the next generation, we can certainly grow more if the government can help us streamline some of the regulations we struggle with and refrain from cutting all the programs we rely on.

In the early days of DOGE several of our oyster-breeding geneticists were laid off, but Paul Zajicek of the National Aquaculture Association was able to convince the new Secretary of Agriculture, Brooke Rollins, to have these critical positions restored. Others who were being interviewed for new positions were never hired, and several staff members took early retirement. As a result, these programs are smaller, but our breeding program survives mainly intact.

The cuts of administrative staff across all agencies in D.C. have been staggering. Thousands of so-called probationary personnel were let go, and many thousands more took the retirement buy-out. It remains to be seen what will happen at NOAA, but draft documents seem to indicate broad cuts to anything associated with coastal science and climate resiliency.

Fortunately, some in the administration seem to favor aquaculture, so the Milford Lab in Connecticut



KATIE DZIEDZIC/NOAA

L to R, South Team members Reed Smith, Adrienne Johnson, Stephan Abel, and Timothy Solano; Laura Grimm, performing the duties of Under Secretary of Commerce for Oceans and Atmosphere and NOAA Administrator; ECSGA Executive Director Bob Rheault.

and the Manchester Research Station in Washington State, (where our oyster breeding work is being conducted) appear to have escaped with only minor cuts. Several individuals who were in the process of being interviewed or hired were let go, contracts are frozen, and purchasing supplies now requires approval from leadership, but at least the work continues.

### Legislative priorities

Our legislative priorities remain largely unchanged from last year. Since the Farm Bill was not passed in 2024, we continued to advocate for the elements we had been working to include in last year's version, including improvements to crop insurance programs and the preservation of research and breeding programs that support our industry.

One of our longstanding priorities was to raise the cap on adjusted gross income (AGI) that determines eligibility for USDA programs such as ELAP (Emergency Assistance for Livestock, Honeybees, and Farm-Raised Fish), crop insurance and many others. Our amendment would allow farmers who gross more than \$900,000 to qualify if over 75% of their earnings are farm-related. Our congressional allies inserted the AGI language into the House version of the Reconciliation Package.

—Continued on page 5



The East Coast Shellfish Growers Association represents more than 2,000 shellfish farmers from Maine to Florida and the Gulf states. These proud stewards of the marine environment produce sustainable, farmed shellfish while providing thousands of jobs in rural coastal towns.

The ECSGA informs policy makers and regulators to protect a way of life.

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Newsletter of the East Coast Shellfish Growers Association — Issue 2 — June 2025

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## From the President King of the Hill



President  
Jeff Auger

Spring has sprung here in the Northeast (kind of), and as the birds started singing and the water turned green with food we knew the time had come for us to dust off our suits and head to the Capitol to visit with our representatives for the annual ECSGA Walk on the Hill. This year

10 members (including me) and Executive Director Bob Rheault attended 40 meetings over three days (a new record). We would like to thank all those who took time out of their busy schedules to join us: Chris Matteo, Heather Ketcham, Kim Husky, Matty Gregg, Stephan Abel, Jordan Nally, Timothy Solano, Adrienne Johnson, and Reed Smith. We split into two teams, North and South, and spent two intensive days walking/racing from meeting to meeting, advocating for the work we all love.

We were there talking about perennial issues you likely have heard about: four Farm Bill markers that would help to reduce paperwork for small farmers, allow larger firms to participate in disaster relief (as long as 75% of their income is farm-related), increase funding for the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Regional Aquaculture Centers, and help elevate aquaculture as a priority within the USDA (SHELLS Act). We also asked for support to prevent importation of seafood products containing hazardous substances, or barring that, destroying the product before it can reach U.S. markets ([Deconstruction of Hazardous Imports Act](#)).

We continued to advocate for core ECSGA issues like working-waterfront access ([Work-](#)

[ing Waterfronts Preservation Act](#)) and funding for aquaculture research through the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and Sea Grant (everybody loves Sea Grant). Finally, we asked for the continued support of our ongoing shellfish genetic research.

Overall, the congressional offices were supportive. Even though it is a very tumultuous time on Capitol Hill, I think we made an impact simply by showing up. The South team in particular made some good progress on moving some of the Farm Bill issues through their offices. However, the reality is that programs are still being defunded and many of the offices and agencies we rely on to innovate and grow our industry are being scaled back.

Cuts to NOAA in particular will undermine our production of sustainable seafood and work to further exacerbate the more than \$20 billion trade deficit we are running. One of our core messages in D.C. is that if we are looking for wise spending that will generate a good return, shellfish aquaculture is a winner: we have consistently demonstrated the ability to grow our industry if we have some support (even in recessions).

The shellfish market has broken into new territory (check out our [April newsletter article](#) on evolving oyster markets). The uncertainty we are facing only heightens the need for support from key government institutions that we have relied on to establish and grow our industry. Taking this message to our elected representatives is what we will continue to do at ECSGA.

Are there any policies or topics we didn't cover? Would you like to join us for the next Walk on the Hill? Please reach out to your ECSGA state representative (listed at [ecsga.org/board-of-directors](#) or on the masthead on page 1) with any questions or concerns so we can ensure that the message we bring to D.C. next year includes your concerns.

## Misleading PFAS Research

An article recently popped up on my Google Alerts: Evaluating the environmental occurrence of per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) and potential exposure risk for recreational shellfish harvesters in the Great Bay Estuary, New Hampshire ([doi.org/10.1016/j.scitotenv.2025.179747](#)).

The first sentence of the abstract caught my attention: "Shellfish may be an important contributor to PFAS exposure from seafood consumption." A graphic on the cover page with big red X's suggests that shellfish consumption is unsafe for adults and children, and that children should avoid contact with sediment. However, the data does not support this conclusion, but rather shows **shellfish from Great Bay are quite safe.**

To learn more about PFAS ("forever chemicals"), take a look at this excellent Sea Grant factsheet ([ecsga.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/PFAS-Shellfish-Fact-Sheet.pdf](#)). PFAS are persistent fluorinated compounds found in many industrial and consumer products, like Teflon™ and firefighting foam, that can pose health risks.

Two of my many concerns with this paper:

1. Of the seven sample sites in the estuary, five are closed to harvest!
2. The researchers assumed that recreational harvesters were collecting shellfish 271 days a year, but of the two open harvest areas sampled, one is open only on Saturdays. Incredibly, the authors characterize their assumption that recreational harvesters dig 271 days a year as "conservative."

The researchers sampled water and sediment, and, at sites where they could find them, collected mussels, oysters, soft-shell clams, and razor clams. Using EPA shellfish consumption estimates, they calculate the average New England adult eats 5.9 gm/day, and the top 10% of shellfish consumers eat 24.6 gm/day (about a dozen oysters a week).

Razor clams collected near the site of the old Pease Air Force Base were the only shellfish with PFAS levels that might be considered even slightly elevated. None of the other shellfish exceeded the health guidance values from any of the harvest areas sampled (even from the closed areas!) even if clams, oysters or mussels were harvested 271 days a year! An accurate abstract should have read, **"Shellfish from Great Bay, NH, are very low in PFAS and safe to eat even regularly—**but limit consumption of razor clams from Great Bay to fewer than 53 days a year."

We are seeking a retraction of this paper and will write a letter to the editor pointing out its flaws. The science is fine, but the conclusions are deeply misleading. —RBR

## HOT AQUACULTURE NEWS!!



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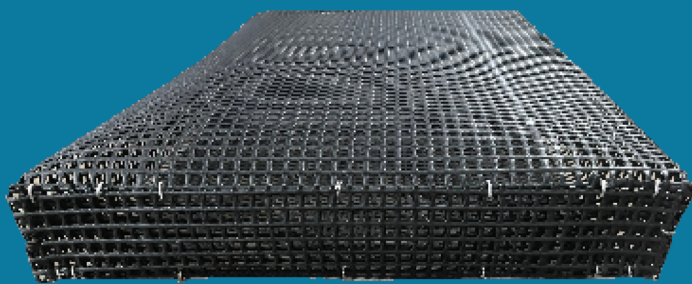




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# Value-Added Shellfish Could Open Up Saturated Oyster Markets

by Robert B. Rheault,  
ECSGA Executive Director

I hope you had a chance to read the story in our [April newsletter](#) about a NOAA-funded project I have been collaborating on with Bobbi Hudson and Matt Parker to evaluate future markets for oysters. Our study highlights concerns about market saturation and emphasizes the need for additional market development if we want demand to keep up with the ever increasing supply of oysters.

As we interviewed dozens of experts from around the country,

and reviewed industry studies and reports, one concept emerged consistently: We need to develop value-added frozen products for consumers to purchase for home consumption. With inflation spiking, fine dining establishments are experiencing declines in patronage, and more consumers are opting for fast-casual and take-out choices (neither of which typically offer oysters).

Younger diners, in particular, are seeking healthier and more convenient options—meal kits, food delivery services, and prepared meals they can quickly grab



ROBERT RHEAULT/ECSGA

Pamlico Packing Company's individually quick frozen (IQF) half-shell oysters are an example of a value-added product that could expand the market to people who want the convenience of shucked oysters at home.

from the freezer aisle for easy home preparation.

The outlook for oyster growers is pretty bleak, since input costs have risen dramatically, while the farm-gate price has not budged in years. Getting hundreds of farmers to agree on how to grow markets in the Midwest is going to be a challenge, but there seems to be a strong consensus that one approach is to develop frozen, value-added products that folks can buy at the grocery store and take home to throw in the oven or microwave, or toss on the grill.

While I was at the North Carolina Aquaculture Development Conference in March, I had a chance to catch a presentation by Don Cross, co-owner of [Pamlico Packing Co.](#) in Grantsboro, North Carolina. Pamlico is a broad-line seafood distributor that offers everything from local shrimp, crab, and fish to tuna, sword and salmon. They also sell local wild and farmed shellfish, and started their own oyster farm about eight years ago. Additionally, they offer fresh and frozen prepared items such as crab cakes, shrimp mac and cheese, shrimp, and shucked oyster meats for local pickup or delivery to restaurants and retailers.

Recently, they have been collaborating with North Carolina Sea Grant and the NC State Seafood Laboratory to develop Individual Quick-Frozen (IQF), topped oyster products that can be vacuum-packed on trays for sale at food service outlets (such as restaurants or cruise ships) or at local fish counters. Eventually, these products could be available in grocery stores nationwide, but

many issues have to be resolved before that happens.

The development process has proven to be quite challenging. Packing crab cakes on a tray is easy enough, but for oysters, you need a special, tough film so that the sharp shell does not poke through when you pull a vacuum. The vacuum-packing machine, IQF tunnel, and packing film all represent significant expenses, along with labor and distribution costs. It is one thing to sell to a food service operation, but once you sell retail, the labeling requirements increase dramatically. Raw shellfish products require traceability lot codes (harvest area and date), nutritional analysis, ingredient lists, and allergen listings. On top of that, the label must be easy to adjust for every batch.

Getting the toppings right is something Pamlico is still working on. They offer four toppings: classic Rockefeller, garlic butter, casino, and Asian. Applying the toppings to individual oysters is something they eventually hope to automate. They also need a steady supply of large, well-shaped, plump oysters that won't shrink to nothing when cooked.

Once you have all these things figured out, then you need to tackle the distribution challenges. It's one thing to get your product out to local food-service establishments, but if you want to break into a national grocery store chain, you may be looking at tens of thousands of dollars just for a spot in the freezer aisle, or even more if you want eye-level placement as opposed to down on the bottom shelf!

—Continued on page 10

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—Continued from page 1  
**Walk the Hill**

We were also pushing legislation called the SHELLS Act, which would add an office of Aquaculture to the USDA to coordinate programs with NOAA and to eliminate redundancy. Some of these measures may be included in the “Reconciliation Bill” that the administration is pushing, which would almost ensure passage. Barring that, leadership is hoping to pass a Farm Bill before September, and most of the measures we have been requesting appear to have strong support.

This year, we pushed with a greater sense of urgency in our efforts to save Sea Grant. In previous years, Sea Grant had faced elimination in the President’s proposed budget, but it was largely viewed as a performative cut, and almost no one took it seriously. Sea Grant has programs in 28 coastal and Great Lakes states and is widely loved by the communities it serves. In the past, Congress has routinely ignored the President’s budget and boosted the Sea Grant line. This year, it is clear that the entire Office of Oceanic and Atmospheric Research is slated for elimination. This would eliminate Sea Grant, as well as several NOAA laboratories and Cooperative Institutes around the country. Any programs tied to climate resiliency, sea level rise, and global warming are in the crosshairs.

We continue to advocate for several bills that would help address the disappearance of working waterfront access. Commercial waterfront is being developed into condos, and marinas are pushing out fishing and aquaculture vessels in favor of recreational boaters and yachts. If a “blue economy” is truly a priority, then we need to preserve and improve access for working boats. The cost of these efforts is significant, and the best solutions may lie with state governments, so we will continue to work on this issue at every level.

We also requested appropriations to fund genetic research on clams so we can develop lines of hard clams that are resistant to QPX disease, heat waves, and low salinity driven by increasingly common epic rain events. There are obviously serious doubts about the ability of Congress to pass a budget in September, much less consider earmarks (now called “congressionally directed spending”), but we will continue to hammer home our position on this issue. It took 16 years to get the oyster breeding program funded, so I guess persistence pays off!

Also on our wish list was a bill (S.93) that would expand funds for harmful-algal-bloom and

hypoxia research and control. These blooms and hypoxia events are killing fish, shellfish, and tourism in red and blue states alike, so we have high hopes of getting S.93 across the finish line this year.

### Shellfish and trade

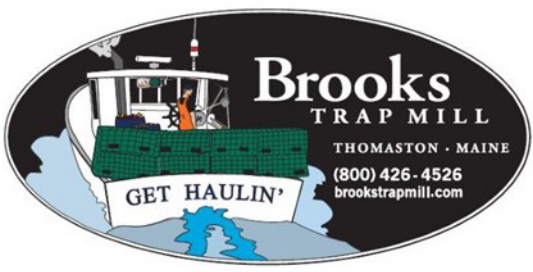
While we were in D.C. I was able to schedule a meeting with the U.S. Trade Representative, who has been working to open trade in shellfish with the European Union. Several years ago, we were able to re-open limited trade after being barred from shipping to the EU in 2005. Years of negotiations resulted in Massachusetts and Washington State being allowed to ship shellfish to the EU, while Spain and the Netherlands were cleared to ship to the U.S. Even though we were assured that other states and EU nations would be added to the list of eligible shippers in an expedited fashion, that process has ground to a halt.

The trade representative explained that all necessary inspections and paperwork had been completed over a year ago, but that finalizing the agreement has been stalled due to the “chilly” relationship between the

U.S. and the EU. We were told that President Trump’s mentioning the shellfish trade with the EU twice since his inauguration should bode well for a settlement—if and when the two sides agree on a new trade package.

It is notable that many of the offices we visited emphasized the importance of our coming to D.C. to help Congress understand the significance of crucial programs that are key to increasing shellfish aquaculture production. Domestic production of sustainable seafood seems like a good fit with the goals of this administration. We should also find a welcome ear for efforts to streamline and cut onerous regulatory requirements.

While changing the 28 federal acts that impact aquaculture may be a significant undertaking, we can work around the edges by tweaking definitions and clarifying intent in order to reduce our regulatory burden and improve efficiency. The President has already issued an Executive Order to advance seafood production, and rumors are floating around that he may be working on a pro-aquaculture EO as well.



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## What's Going on at the ISSC?

by Robert B. Rheault,  
ECSCA Executive Director

Most of you know that the Interstate Shellfish Sanitation Conference (ISSC) oversees every aspect of shellfish harvesting, processing, and shipping—including water quality standards, *Vibrio* control plans, tagging, and shipper facility design and records. The body is supposed to meet every two years, and was due to meet this coming October. However, the board postponed the fall meeting because it seemed likely that a government shutdown could disrupt plans, and losing the hotel deposit would have bankrupted the ISSC.

The hope is to reschedule a meeting in spring 2026, but stay tuned for updates. These meetings are essential because they allow us to negotiate changes to regulations so they reflect new scientific advancements, technologies, or practices. Industry members play a critical role in helping regulators

understand what we need in order to do our jobs. State regulators enforce the regulations and hold all the votes, while the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has an oversight role to ensure that the states are adhering to the National Shellfish Sanitation Program (NSSP).

Between meetings, the work continues. More than two dozen committees meet regularly to refine proposals and debate language that will be voted on at the next conference. The process is arcane, glacial, and often frustrating. Writing effective regulations is challenging because our industry is incredibly diverse, and the law of unintended consequences frequently rears its ugly head. This is why industry involvement in the process is critical. As an active participant serving on several committees, I understand some industry practices, but there is no way for me to know how all shellfish is harvested, handled, and shipped in every region.

For example, in the Aquaculture Committee we are currently discussing revising the guidance for state regulators to help them address issues related to birds on floating gear. Additionally, we have been assigned the task of determining how to regulate the nursery culture of shellfish seed in uncertified or prohibited waters. Many growers are using floating upwellers in marinas, which, by definition, are unsuitable for the harvesting of shellfish. However, several studies indicate that marinas serve as ideal locations for growing seed, provided that the seed are cultivated in clean waters for an appropriate time before harvesting.

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The ISSC Aquaculture Committee continues to work on revising guidance for state regulators to address issues related to birds on floating gear.

About 20 years ago I succeeded in convincing the ISSC that seed could be safely reared in marinas, and they decided that a year of purging was necessary. I was later able to demonstrate that four months was adequate, as indicated by the science. For the past six years, I have been trying to convince regulators that four months is actually overkill and two months should be sufficient. We allow relay of harvest-size shellfish from restricted waters for shorter periods (depending on the state) and we even require areas that have been impacted by raw sewage spills to be closed for only 30 days.

These negotiations are necessary because we want rules to be science-based, and we want to avoid any potential impacts to public health, but we also need regulations that don't hamstring industry. Regulations also need to be enforceable and workable in every region. Since shellfish grow at different rates in different regions, and some states have a minimum harvest size while others don't, we often end up trying to develop rules that give regulators options, since one-size-fits-all may not always work.

Industry representation has been declining in recent years because everyone has businesses to run and lives to lead. Taking several days off work to travel to the ISSC meetings is expensive and time-consuming. But I am raising this issue because the importance of this work cannot be overstated. You have a voice and a seat at the table, but only if you participate in the process and show up. If there's a regulation costing you time or money and you think it's not protecting public health, there's a good chance it can be fixed or modified when the next ISSC meeting convenes to debate proposals for changes to the National Shellfish Sanitation Program Model Ordinance. Just contact me at [bob@ecsga.org](mailto:bob@ecsga.org) and I will help you craft a proposal before the submission deadline. Without industry input, the FDA will just tell you what to do, and I'd be willing to bet that you won't like what they come up with.



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# USDA's Proposed 2026 Discretionary Budget

by Robert B. Rheault,  
ECSCGA Executive Director

On May 30, the Trump Administration released its proposed 2026 USDA Discretionary Budget. They are requesting \$24 billion for FY 2026, which reflects a reduction of nearly \$18 billion from the \$42 billion FY 2025 USDA discretionary budget. The total USDA budget for 2025 amounts to \$234 billion, of which \$42.2 billion is categorized as “discretionary.” This includes the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), food safety, rural development loans and grants, research and education, soil and water conservation technical assistance, animal and plant health, Forest Service activities, and domestic and international marketing assistance.

The entire document runs to 54 pages, but I will highlight some of the programs we rely on:

- ❑ The Farm Service Agency announced that over 1,600 positions had been cut. The current budget announcement reveals a reduction of \$375 million through cutting salaries by \$259 million, eliminating the \$7 million state mediation grants, and implementing other cuts.
- ❑ The Risk Management Agency’s proposed budget reduces staff funding by 10%.

❑ The Natural Resource Conservation Service budget decreases from \$916 million in 2025 to \$112 million in 2026, due to cuts to Conservation Technical Assistance and the elimination of Watershed and Flood Prevention operations. The Environmental Quality Incentives program will see a slight increase from \$31 million to \$36 million.

❑ Rural Development cuts include eliminating value-added producer grants totaling \$12 million.

❑ The Animal Plant Health Inspection Service (which includes Wildlife Services) remains mostly unchanged, except for the removal of the Commodity Credit Corporation, which was funded at \$692 million in 2025.

❑ The Agricultural Research Service (ARS), which funds our oyster genetics program, is implementing a modest 5% reduction, primarily by removing the budget allocation for buildings and facilities.

❑ The National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) is decreasing its research budget from \$1.7 billion to \$1.04 billion, a 38% reduction.

❑ The Economic Research Service is taking a 10% cut, while the National Agriculture Statistics Service escapes unscathed.

To view the complete USDA budget document visit: [www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/2026-usda-budget-summary.pdf](http://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/2026-usda-budget-summary.pdf).

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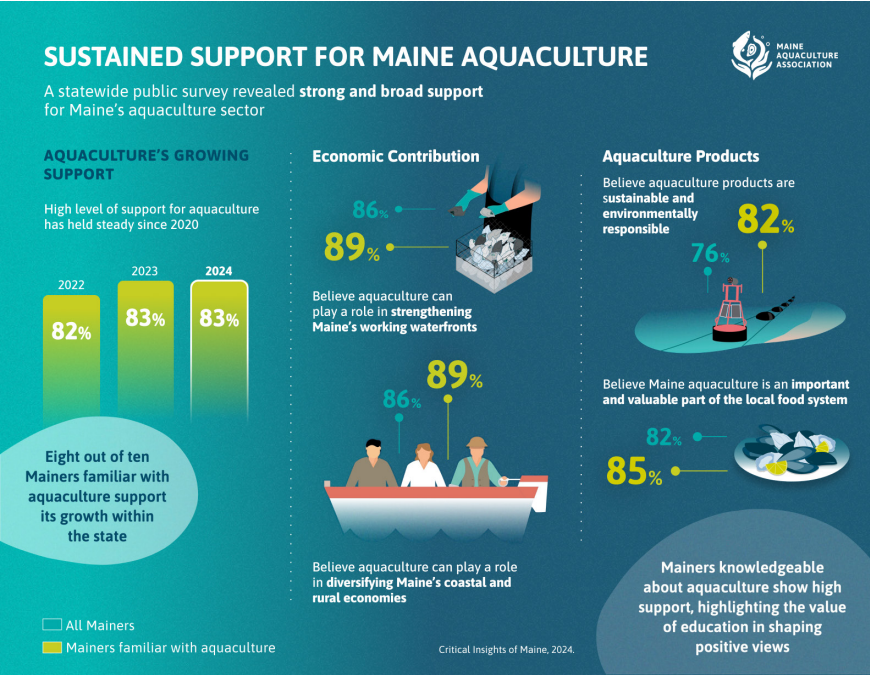
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— Mark Begley, Beach Point Oysters  
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# Nutritional Analysis of East Coast Shellfish

I was approached last fall by a group called Food + Planet ([foodandplanet.org](http://foodandplanet.org)), a 501(c)(3) organization founded by four registered dietitians with varied experience in food systems. Food + Planet's mission is to "empower food professionals to advance sustainable food systems." They wanted to analyze farmed shellfish for nutritional information so that growers and dealers could better describe the health benefits of our products.

We supplied Food + Planet with samples of oysters, mussels, and clams, which they shipped off to labs for analysis of every aspect of composition—from vitamins to minerals, protein, lipid, carbohydrate, and metals.

Based on those analyses, Food + Planet is now poised to release a bivalves producer guide, along with a consumer-focused partner guide, that they hope will improve the understanding of the nutrition and health benefits of bivalve shellfish. The project was funded by the Builders Initiative, a philanthropic foundation that supports sustainable food production.

We were able to look at a spreadsheet detailing the nutritional analyses of the clam, oyster, and mussel samples they used, reported as Daily Values (DV). According to the National Institutes of Health (NIH), "a DV is often, but not always, similar to the Recommended Daily Amount (RDA) or Adequate Intake (AI) for a nutrient. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) developed DVs to help consumers determine the level of various nutrients in a standard serving of food in relation to their approximate requirement for it. The label actually provides the %DV so that you can see how much (what percentage) a serving of the product contributes to reaching the DV."

Here are some of the highlights from the nutritional analyses, based on a U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) reference serving of 85 grams (think 5-6 medium-sized oysters):

- ❑ Mussels (*Mytilus edulis*) were rated a "good" source (defined as 10-19% DV) of

folic acid, magnesium, zinc, and sulfur; and an excellent source (20% or more DV) of riboflavin, iron, and vitamin B12. In fact, **one serving of mussels provides 11 times the % DV of vitamin B12**, along with 8 grams of protein.

- ❑ Oysters (*Crassostrea virginica*) were rated a "good" source of niacin, riboflavin, iron, magnesium, and sulphur. Oysters were rated an "excellent" source of copper, zinc, and vitamin B12. In fact they **provide more than 12 times the DV of vitamin B12!**
- ❑ Hard clams (*Mercenaria mercenaria*) were rated a "good" source of riboflavin, iron, magnesium, and sulphur. Clams, like all shellfish, are also an "excellent" source of vitamin B12, providing more than 6 times the DV!
- ❑ All three types of shellfish contained less than 0.1 grams of saturated fat.
- ❑ None of the shellfish samples exceeded levels of concern for toxic metals such as arsenic, cadmium, chromium, lead, or mercury.

—RBR



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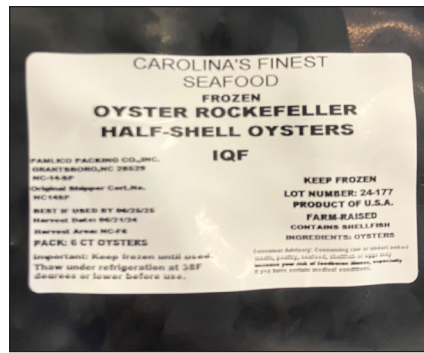
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—Continued from page 4  
**Value-Added Oysters**

At this point, Cross is still working out the bugs, but he hopes to see a price point of \$10 to \$12 for a tray with six, topped oysters just to justify the investment. I am hoping that this turns into a winner for him, as it would be a great way to induce younger consumers in the heartland to develop a taste for oysters.

I was impressed by the support that Don received from the NC State Seafood Laboratory and Sea Grant. I know that some states have been offering low-interest loans and grants for seafood processing equipment, but the long road to transforming this from concept to prod-



ROBERT RHEAULT/ECSGA

Pamlico Packing Company is still working out the bugs, but hopes to see a price point of \$10 to \$12 for a tray of six individually quick frozen (IQF) Oysters Rockefeller. Many challenges must be overcome before a product like this prototype could make it to the supermarket frozen-food aisle.

uct seems like a much bigger challenge than I would have predicted. It's a shame that the U.S. Department of Agriculture has plans to eliminate the entire Value-Added Producer Grant

program in the FY 2026 Discretionary Budget. It is clear to me that we will need more innovative products like these if we want to continue growing our oyster markets.

*Check Out*

**Rookie Mistakes**

Whether you've been growing shellfish for years or are just starting out, it never hurts to review some common rookie mistakes that could end up costing you a bundle.

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# Some Hope for SUMS Resilience

by Tal Ben-Horin, North Carolina State University College of Veterinary Medicine

The expansion of oyster aquaculture along our Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico estuaries has met with dramatic mortality events, often impacting the same locations year after year. These events have become known as Sudden Unusual Mortality Syndrome, or SUMS, with oyster farmers at times facing near total crop loss. These losses can sometimes occur rapidly—over a period of weeks—and consistently are not associated with typical causes such as disease or poor husbandry. Hatchery-sourced triploid oysters appear to be particularly susceptible. However, evaluating risks associated with triploid oysters is complicated by different regional preferences for triploids and by the few tetraploid lines available for commercial production, which confound genetic and local breeding effects with effects of ploidy. Given the diverse environments and seed sources across the Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico coasts, understanding risk factors associated with SUMS remains a challenge.

Nevertheless, new research may offer some hope and a path forward. Working with a team of pathologists, shellfish breeders, and geneticists from the University of North Carolina (UNC) Wilmington, UNC Chapel Hill, the Virginia Institute of Marine Science, and North Carolina State University’s College of Veterinary Medicine, we implemented a regional field deployment to address the interaction between broodstock genetics and ploidy when evaluating SUMS risks. We produced diploid and triploid oysters from North Carolina and Virginia broodstock, and deployed those oysters to seven field sites across North Carolina and Virginia.

That field study, with results recently published in *Aquaculture*, ([doi.org/10.1016/j.aquaculture.2025.742691](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aquaculture.2025.742691)) found the effects of ploidy to depend on the genetic background of deployed oysters. At farm sites most heavily impacted by SUMS, which were predominantly in North Carolina, diploid oysters from North Carolina broodstock performed best, while diploid oysters derived from Virginia broodstock performed worst. But the effects of ploidy differed depending on context: at farm sites most heavily impacted by SUMS, triploids produced from North Carolina broodstock and commercially available tetraploids were worse off than those North Carolina diploids, while triploids from Virginia broodstock and those same commercially available tetraploids performed better than the Virginia diploids. **These patterns point toward broodstock genetics as an important driver of SUMS resilience.**

The open question driving our research now is whether SUMS resilience can be inherited. Our preliminary results suggest this may be



JULIA BUCK/UNC

Project team members Ami Wilbur and Tal Ben-Horin, with Lila Ben-Horin, at the University of North Carolina Wilmington Shellfish Research Hatchery. Preliminary results from the study seem to indicate that resistance to Sudden Unusual Mortality Syndrome (SUMS) in oysters can be inherited. This finding will inform future studies that could identify genomic markers and traits associated with resilience.

the case. We have produced diploid oyster lines from broodstock that have survived through SUMS events; compared to oyster lines produced from related broodstock that have not survived through SUMS, these

“selected” oyster lines survived better when deployed to a farm site impacted by SUMS. This is just a start.

We are now testing whether oyster lines produced from broodstock surviving through SUMS are more resilient when deployed to diverse SUMS-impacted farm sites. If successful, this will allow us to move into identifying genomic markers and phenotypic traits associated with resilience, which will allow us to expand and develop breeding evaluations for triploid and tetraploid oyster lines. We eventually aim to work with partners across the Atlantic and Gulf coasts to integrate this information into existing oyster breeding programs in order to develop resources for the industry to tackle SUMS risks coastwide.



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# Do Vegans or Vegetarians Eat Oysters?

by Robert B. Rheault,  
ECSCGA Executive Director

This question turned out to be more complicated than I first thought. The official definition of a vegan is a person who does not eat any food derived from animals, while vegetarians still consume honey, milk, eggs, and certain other animal products, but not animals *per se*.

The reason I had to look this up is that I am working with a team researching oyster markets. We purchased a dataset from

the commercial research firm Datassential, Inc., which surveyed consumers about their experience with oysters, finding that 47% of consumers “have tried oysters.” Of those who have tried oysters, 15% “love it,” 17% “like it,” 14% are neutral, 14% “dislike it,” and 14% “hate it.” Millennials showed the highest affinity for oysters (17%), followed by Boomers (16%), Gen X (15%), and Gen Z (10%).

Meanwhile, 18% of men and 12% of women indicated an affinity for oysters. Oyster lovers identified themselves as “Food-



VIVIANA RISHE ON UNSPLASH

ies” (20%), “Health-Focused” (18%), “Meat Eater” (16%), “Flexitarian/Pescatarian” (15%), and “Vegan/Vegetarian” (5%). Consumers in the Northeast had the highest affinity for oysters at 18%, compared to the South at 16% and the Midwest at 10%.

The data point that caught my attention was that 5% of oyster lovers self-identify as vegans or vegetarians! This led me down a deep rabbit hole on the web, where there is considerable debate in the online community. Some strict vegans refuse to eat any animals, while a sizable subset of vegetarians argues that bivalves are acceptable because they have no brain and cannot feel pain.

The question likely centers on why the person has chosen to be a vegan in the first place. Many people embrace a vegan diet due to concerns about the sustainability of food. I believe these consumers should consider eating farmed shellfish, as it is one of the most sustainable food sources on the planet. We earn the gold star from sustainability certification groups like Seafood Watch because of our low carbon footprint and the fact that we don’t use chemicals, feeds, or antibiotics. The Nature Conservancy advocates for “restorative aquaculture” because of the ecological benefits we provide, including improved water quality and excellent fish habitat.

If someone is vegan out of compassion for animals and a desire to avoid causing pain, they should check out the lively online debate about whether animals without brains can feel pain. Some Michelin chefs and noted vegetarian authors argue that shellfish are acceptable, noting that shellfish are not sentient

beings and that many organisms are killed in the process of farming plants.

Sometimes, people choose to be vegan because they dislike certain textures or flavors associated with animal protein. Many individuals avoid raw oysters due to their texture, so for them, I highly recommend starting with a grilled oyster. I should probably avoid mentioning that a really fresh


oyster’s heart is still beating when we shuck it, as that often freaks out even the most dedicated meat eaters.


I definitely should avoid telling others what to eat. I spent too many years arguing with my kids, trying to get them to eat what we were serving, and I invariably lost those battles. But I have found that you can often get young kids to try oysters by using reverse psychology. If you warn them that, “You probably won’t like that, it’s grownup food,” suddenly, they’re gobbling oysters like candy!

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# Two-Alarm Fire Damages Matunuck Oyster Bar

by Ann Kane Rheault,  
ECSCG Newsletter Editor

At 3:44 a.m. on May 20, 2025, the call came in to the Union Fire District in South Kingstown, Rhode Island. The nationally recognized and universally beloved Matunuck Oyster Bar was on fire. By the time firefighters arrived at the scene eight minutes later, they were met with a full-on conflagration, with wind-whipped flames shooting out from the rear and second story of the restaurant. In all, 35 firefighters from several communities responded to the two-alarm fire, and within 90 minutes they had successfully beaten back the flames and brought the fire under control.

Thankfully, nobody was injured, but the building sustained significant damage just days before the Memorial Day weekend marking the start of the busy summer season for owner Perry Raso and around 300 employees at the waterside fixture.

Chief Steven Pinch of the Union Fire District said the building was, “still standing, but between the water, fire and smoke damage, the structural problems are significant.”

The Office of the State Fire Marshal, the Union Fire District Fire Marshal’s Office, and the South Kingstown Police Department are continuing their investigations into what caused the fire, but were able to determine early on that it was accidental and was not a direct result of cooking equipment.

Raso said in a statement:

“I would like to sincerely thank the Union Fire District of South Kingstown and neighboring fire fighters who were on site heroically fighting the Matunuck Oyster Bar fire when I arrived in the early morning of Tuesday, May 20. While the damage to our building is devastating to me, our patrons, and our employees, we are very thankful no one was injured.

“As we assess our next steps, our first priority is in finding ways to assist our more than 300 full-time and seasonal employees, whose service and dedication have made Matunuck Oyster Bar what it is today, and who rely on this business to support themselves and their families. We are currently working closely [with the Rhode Island] Department of Labor & Training, the Governor’s Office, and other public officials to identify available resources, and we are committed to staying in direct contact with our team members as our long-term plan for Matunuck Oyster Bar is developed.



UNION FIRE DISTRICT/SOUTH KINGSTOWN, R.I.

A devastating fire at Rhode Island’s iconic Matunuck Oyster Bar felt like a death in the family to many in the South County community and beyond. Perry Raso opened the pond-to-table restaurant in 2009 and has worked continuously to improve the building while maintaining consistently high standards of food quality and service. The restaurant was the go-to place for patrons celebrating special occasions or showing off world-class cuisine to out-of-town guests. Earlier this year it was named one of the 44 best restaurants in the country by USA Today. Raso has committed to reopening as soon as possible.

“I’d like to extend a heartfelt thank you to our neighbors, patrons, partners, colleagues and friends from Rhode Island and beyond, who have reached out over the last several

hours with selfless offers to help. We are humbled by this outpouring of kindness from our community, and we are working to explore the most efficient and most impactful avenues available, in order to ensure that our staff receives assistance during this difficult time.

“We are humbled and grateful for what Matunuck Oyster Bar represents to so many people. While we are heartbroken that our doors will be temporarily closed, we are committed to opening them back up and welcoming guests back to our tables as soon as possible.”

A Go Fund Me campaign to support rebuilding efforts and to help employees had raised more than \$212,000 by mid-June. To make a contribution, visit [www.gofundme.com/f/matunuck-oyster-bar-fire-recovery-fund](http://www.gofundme.com/f/matunuck-oyster-bar-fire-recovery-fund).

Another fund has been established by the Rhode Island Hospitality Education Foundation ([www.rihospitality.org/mob](http://www.rihospitality.org/mob)), which is serving as the official point of contact for all Matunuck Oyster Bar employee relief requests, and promises that 100% of funds raised will go directly to employees in the coming months.



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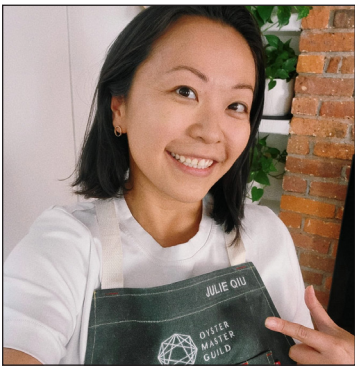
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# PCSGA to Meet in Vancouver, Wash. Sept. 8–11

Join us for the 79<sup>th</sup> Annual Shellfish Conference and Tradeshow, hosted by the Pacific Coast Shellfish Growers Association (PCSGA) and the National Shellfisheries Association-Pacific Coast Section (NSA-PCS), taking place September 8–11, 2025, in beautiful Vancouver, Washington. This flagship event brings together shellfish farmers, researchers, resource managers, policy makers, and industry partners from across the Pacific Coast to connect, collaborate, and celebrate our shared commitment to sustainable aquaculture.

This year’s conference will feature engaging panels, technical sessions, and updates on regulatory, scientific, and policy developments that impact our industry. We’re especially excited to welcome



Renowned international oyster expert, educator, and brand strategist Julie Qiu will be a guest speaker at the PCSGA annual conference and tradeshow in Vancouver, Washington.

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With Executive Director Margaret Pilaro back at the wheel, no PCSGA gathering would be complete without fun and games. She is bound to outdo herself once again this year.

renowned guest speakers Julie Qiu—founder of the Oyster Master Guild and the celebrated In a Half Shell blog—and award-winning food writer and author Erin Byers Murray, whose work explores the intersection of sea-food, sustainability, and culture.

Whether you’re a veteran grower or just getting started in the industry, this is your opportunity to gain insights, strengthen partnerships, and discover the latest innovations in gear, technology, and best practices at our vibrant tradeshow. If you are planning to attend and are interested in presenting, submissions are now open! Visit [members.pcsga.org/2025-conference-presentation-submission-form](http://members.pcsga.org/2025-conference-presentation-submission-form).

Save the date and make plans to join us in Vancouver for a dynamic, informative, and inspiring gathering of the West Coast shellfish community. Registration and full agenda coming soon at [PCSGA.org](http://PCSGA.org). —PCSGA



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## Coming Events

### Virtual Aquaculture Job Fair. July 23.

Job fair for employers and job seekers. 12pm. Visit [members.nationalaquaculture.org/calendar/Details/virtual-job-fair-for-u-s-aquaculture-1386400?sourceType=Hub](https://members.nationalaquaculture.org/calendar/Details/virtual-job-fair-for-u-s-aquaculture-1386400?sourceType=Hub).

### PCSGA/NSA-PCS.

Sept. 8-11. Pacific Coast Shellfish Association and National Shellfisheries Association Pacific Coast Section conference and tradeshow. Vancouver, WA. Visit [pcsga.org/conference-tradeshow](https://pcsga.org/conference-tradeshow).

### Seafood HACCP

**Training.** Sept. 16-17. Hands-on training course on the FDA's Fish and Fishery Products Hazards and Controls Guidance. Rosebrook Events Center, Wareham, MA. Visit [profishant.com/seafood-haccp-course-registration](https://profishant.com/seafood-haccp-course-registration).

### Landlocked9. Oct.

19. Oyster and BBQ festival fundraiser for Oyster South. Legacy Park, Decatur, GA. Visit [www.oystersouth.com](https://www.oystersouth.com).

### North Atlantic Fish & Workboat Show. Nov.

14-15. Trade show. Mary Brown's Centre, St. John's, Newfoundland, Canada. Visit [www.nafish.ca](https://www.nafish.ca).

### NACE 2026. Jan. 7-9.

Northeast Aquaculture Conference & Exposition and the Milford Aquaculture Seminar. Holiday Inn by the Bay, Portland, ME. Visit [www.northeastaquaculture.org](https://www.northeastaquaculture.org).

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**Billion Oyster Party**  
**Thursday, September 25, 2025**  
**6-10 p.m.**

**Liberty Warehouse, Red Hook, Brooklyn, NYC**

NYC's most highly anticipated oyster bash of the year—known to participating farms for a decade as “Oyster Prom”—means freshly shucked oysters from farms across the country, drinks along the waterfront, live music, tastes from our Shell Collection partner restaurants, and an All-Star Shucking Competition... all in support of Billion Oyster Project's work to restore oyster reefs to New York City with New Yorkers.

Proceeds from the event directly support Billion Oyster Project's restoration and education work. Together, we can revive our shared blue space, creating a healthier, happier, and more resilient city. This year we

are thrilled to celebrate a milestone in our journey to restore 1 billion oysters to New York Harbor!

Here's a sneak peak at what you can expect from yet another unforgettable evening:

- ❑ Unlimited oysters from over 40 farms across the country—hand-shucked by our generous oyster farmer friends and partners.
- ❑ Bites from NYC's top restaurants in our Shell Recycling Program, overlooking Red Hook's waterfront and Lady Liberty herself.
- ❑ A chance to mingle with the members of our ecosystem: our crew, supporters, artists, farmers, members, teachers, and partners.



❑ A deeper connection to New York Harbor and our beautiful estuary city by learning more about our mission to restore it back to health through oyster reef restoration and public education initiatives.

***Tickets go on sale in July!***

Stay tuned for all party details, delivered to your inbox by [subscribing to our newsletter](#).

See you soon,

*The Crew at Billion Oyster Project*



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## ECSGA Dues Categories

Growers, dealers and equipment suppliers enjoy full voting rights. (If you are both a grower and a dealer simply ask yourself where most of your revenue comes from.) If you don't fall into one of these industry categories please consider joining as a non-voting associate member.

Member Type	Gross Annual Sales	Dues
Grower	\$0 to 50,000	\$100
Grower	\$50,000 to \$100,000	\$200
Grower	\$100,000 to 300,000	\$500
Grower	\$300,000 to 1 million	\$1,000
Grower	\$1 million to \$3 million	\$2,000
Grower	over \$3 million	\$3,000
Shellfish Dealers and Equipment Suppliers		\$250
Restaurant Ally		\$100
Non-voting Associate		\$50

You can pay your membership dues online with a credit card or mail this form with your check to:

ECSGA  
111 Myrtle St.  
New Bedford, MA 02740



Name \_\_\_\_\_

Company \_\_\_\_\_

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\* Rest assured, your sales information will be closely guarded and will not be shared!

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