

EAST COAST SHELLFISH GROWERS ASSOCIATION

Mouth of the Bay: Regulations Throttle U.S. Aquaculture Growth

by Robert B. Rheault,
ECSGA Executive Director

In this newsletter, we delve deep into the issue of regulations. Shellfish growers have long complained that regulations are a huge barrier to growth. I have often said that when you compare shellfish production among the various states, those with negligible production are usually not victims of poor water quality or lazy workers, but rather are quashed by overzealous regulations. (I'm looking at you, Georgia and Delaware).

Our industry is regulated by dozens of federal acts, hundreds of pages of shellfish sanitation regulations, and mountains of state regulations on leasing (see the massive [spreadsheet](#) assembled by the National Sea Grant Law Center at the University of Mississippi School of Law and Lester Lab at Florida State University). On top of that, in some states town laws and ordinances are also applicable.

A recent [article](#) in the North American Journal of Aquaculture written by a team at Virginia Tech estimated the **regulatory burden**

on East Coast shellfish farms at an average of **\$28,849 per farm** (about 7% of total farm costs). This cost burden has a disproportionate impact on smaller farms because most regulatory costs are fixed, and are mostly similar for small and large farms.

Lease transfer regulations

It is fascinating to examine the different regulatory strategies employed by various states. Lease fees vary from a few dollars an acre to \$500! New York and Massachusetts have town rules on leasing that can supersede state laws. For instance, while almost every state has provisions allowing lease transfers, many towns in Massachusetts do not permit them. At least one town does not allow a lease to be sold following the death of the owner, instead offering that lease to a waiting list of applicants unless a family member residing in the town can take over the operation.

Restrictions on the ability to transfer a lease have enormous economic implications. Envision a grower who has invested decades of capital and labor to build a company, but gets injured or decides it is time to retire. If they cannot sell their lease, they have no nest

egg to take them through retirement. If the leaseholder passes away, there is no asset in the estate unless a family member lives in the town and can take over the operation.

Worse yet, most towns in Massachusetts lease only to individuals, not to corporations. I always advise growers to hold their lease and farm assets in a corporation in case someone injures themselves on their lease. This protects your personal assets in case

you get sued. Personally, I don't know if I could sleep at night fearing I might lose my house to a sharp lawyer who convinces a jury my oysters or gear were to blame for an unfortunate illness (or worse).

The towns on Cape Cod that resist lease transfers do so largely to avoid consolidation, but better tools to

limit consolidations without restricting lease sales exist. The fear that an individual might gain control over several leases means that the vast majority of farms in the state are small-scale. To get around these limitations a few growers work with other leaseholders to achieve significant scale, and those farms are among the most productive in the state.

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VA MARINE POLICE

Christopher Schillaci Selected As ECSGA Executive Director

by Christopher Schillaci
Incoming ECSGA Executive Director



Christopher Schillaci

I am honored to join the East Coast Shellfish Growers Association as its incoming executive director. For 16 years, my work has centered on advancing sound science, effective management, and the responsible growth of aquaculture on the East Coast and across the country. It has been

a privilege to support an industry defined by hard work, ingenuity, and a deep commitment to coastal economies, and I am excited to bring that experience to the ECSGA at this pivotal moment.

My career began at the Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries, where I became recognized as a national expert in *Vibrio* and aquaculture management. More importantly,

I learned what it means to serve a professional industry with professional management. I worked to ensure that hatcheries, growers, and dealers—whose investments and livelihoods anchor our sector—were supported by regulatory frameworks grounded in transparency, integrity, and practical, science-based policy. That work included modernizing long-standing approaches to disease management, tagging, nursery operations, and expanded trade opportunities, always with the goal of protecting responsible operators and ensuring that regulations worked for the full range of farms and business models across the state.

At the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), I carried that same commitment to the national stage. I worked to ensure that the needs, challenges, and economic importance of the existing shellfish aquaculture industry were honored and prioritized in federal investment, policy development, and day-to-day decision-making. I helped elevate the positive ecosystem services provided by shellfish farms in regulatory decision-making, strengthened coordination between NOAA and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and supported efforts to refine assumptions about aquaculture and protected-species interactions so they more

accurately reflected real-world conditions and the best available science.

My role at NOAA also expanded to include marine spatial planning and science to support aquaculture development, where I helped agencies and partners better understand how shellfish farming fits within a balanced, working waterfront and a healthy coastal ecosystem. I led efforts to ensure that shellfish aquaculture was accurately represented in regional ocean planning and decision-support tools. I worked to integrate farm-level realities into national aquaculture initiatives so that siting, permitting, and environmental reviews reflected the true footprint, benefits, and operational needs of shellfish farms. This included developing science and tools that highlighted ecosystem services, clarified interactions with other ocean uses, and ensured that aquaculture was considered alongside fisheries, habitat, navigation, and conservation priorities.

As the current chair of the Interstate Shellfish Sanitation Conference's (ISSC) Aquaculture Committee, I have led efforts to expand the use of operational plans that give growers greater flexibility while maintaining strong food-safety protections, particularly for seed management in prohibited waters

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Regulations Throttling Growth

But many growers are limited to two or three acres, which means that they are usually part-time farmers forced to work several jobs.

Some growers have found ways to transfer their leases by co-owning a lease for several years and then relinquishing their share, but the rules against having corporate ownership and blocking lease sales seem unfair and counterproductive. The fear of consolidation and the opposition to corporate ownership are almost uniquely a New England trait. Yankees revere the small grower—the owner-operator—and many rail against the large farms.

How big is too big?

Is it right to force farms to stay small so they can never achieve the economies of scale that allow them to be profitable? Several economists have documented that the break-even price for a grower selling a few hundred thousand oysters is two to three times higher than that for a farm producing several million (See my [April 2025 article](#)). I saw this principle in action when my farm grew big enough to support five employees and the bottom line turned black. Finally I was able to pay my employees a living wage and offer them healthcare.

If you never get to scale, you can never afford that tumbler or that winch, and you are committed to a lifetime of back-breaking labor until your body wears out. Once you get to scale, maybe you can stop counting to 100 hundreds of times a week and consider

investing in an optical sorter. Maybe you can delegate instead of trying to always be the jack of all trades. Maybe you can support your local growers' association and spend time on regulatory reforms at the state and federal levels. Ample evidence exists to show that the presence of large firms enhances new farms' ability to become established. The larger farms can support state associations and push for regulatory reforms. Often, larger farms can help with marketing and can afford legal assistance when the industry comes under attack. In addition, large farms often engage in research efforts that benefit the entire industry.

Meanwhile, I worry that smaller farms are often struggling financially and may be inclined to cut corners, skirting regulations or safety recommendations, which is not in the best interest of the industry at large. This is why the greatest fear of the older farmer is often the new startup. If someone gets hurt or a customer gets sick, the whole industry gets a black eye.

I am not advocating for monopolies, but we don't need to fear them. It takes a committed farm owner to do the work we do. Many of us would benefit from forming cooperatives and working together to achieve some of the benefits of scale. If only we were not competitors in the market and a bunch of fractious, independently-minded entrepreneurs, we might be more inclined to work together.

Lease restrictions on residency, subleasing, or use requirements

The Sea Grant Law Center [spreadsheet](#) also allows anyone to compare some of the

nitty-gritty differences between states. Some of these differences have significant impacts on the industry. For instance, some states impose residency requirements, while others have decided that outside ownership allows growers to access capital to build their farms, while still acknowledging that the work will be done by locals, and most of those salaries and much of the farm's expenses will contribute to the local economy.

Seven states prohibit subleasing entirely, while others require approval from the state regulatory authority. This approval ensures that growing methods remain consistent with the original application, the applicant meets eligibility requirements, and the applicant is aware of relevant regulations and penalties for non-compliance. Curiously, some of the states that do not allow subleasing do not appear to enforce the restriction.

All but five states require that leases be actively farmed, or they will be revoked. A use requirement ensures that waterfront homeowners don't lease grounds in front of their homes to block farming, or that growers don't lock up the best growing sites to block competition. These would be anti-aquaculture practices that run counter to the intent of having leases in the first place.

That being said, use requirements are hard to enforce, and in many states lease revocation is rarely pursued. It is hard to decide how much investment or effort-per-acre would meet the requirement, or how much product sales would be proof of active use. And once those criteria are established, it is often difficult to enforce the rules. Nonetheless,

it is incumbent on the state to try and maximize the benefits gleaned from its public trust resources, and ensuring that leases are productive serves that goal.

I should probably lose my job for suggesting this, but another way to increase efficiency is to jack up lease fees. This is probably not a great idea after just complaining about onerous regulatory costs, but my lease fees were never one of the major cost centers for my business, despite my state having among the highest per-acre rates on the East Coast.

These are just a few examples of how states can craft regulations that kill their own industries. Strangling interstate seed transport, excessive permit fees, not using science to guide regulations, failing to block theft, or not allowing the use of innovative gear types are all examples. States can choose to be actively pro-industry, too. A few years ago, I developed a PowerPoint highlighting what I call Best Management Practices for Regulators. Visit our website to view the [video](#) or [pdf version](#).



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Coming Out of Your Shell: Marketing Best Practices for Your Business

by Mason Bailey,
ECSCGA Executive Assistant

Waking up before dawn, getting out on the water, and dragging in late. The life of a grower is certainly laborious, and the last thing you want to do after a long day is check emails or log onto social media. That said, it's important to follow a few best practices to increase visibility and enjoy the fruits of your labor as much as possible. Marketing your business and product involves not only maintaining consistent quality, but also advertising and communicating with your customers.

Establishing a successful marketing strategy makes all the difference in maximizing profits. A [2022 study](#) conducted by the University of Florida's Institute for Food and Agricultural Sciences found that advertising an oyster's unique attributes, such as flavor profile, meat color, saltiness, and growing environment resulted in a roughly 14% increase in price per oyster. How you grow, package, store, and present your product guides how you are able to talk about and sell it—as detailed by ECSCGA Executive Director Robert Rheault in "[What Does the Oyster Consumer Want](#)," a short article available on the ECSCGA website.

In order to reach the widest audience of potential buyers and confidently price your oysters to best reflect the true costs of your labor and overhead, it's important to stand out from the crowd and to use multiple channels to promote your operation. At a bare minimum you should be listing your contact information, including phone number, email, physical address and online media presence. This can be done through a public Facebook profile or Google Business page. Both are free and reach 71% of U.S. adults and 85% of the country's search-engine market, respectively. Opening multiple social-media accounts, such as on Instagram or TikTok, and frequently posting about your product will provide additional publicity and can help target younger audiences. Using these various communications chan-

nels makes it quick and easy for consumers to provide feedback and interaction. Shellfish growers and other aquaculturists benefit too, through knowledge sharing, collaboration, and inspiration.

Opening a Google Business account takes only a few minutes and allows potential customers to find your information with a simple Google search. The business listing will appear on the right side of the results webpage.

How to Open a Google Business Account

1. Go to business.google.com.
2. Click on **Start Now** or **Create Your Profile**.
3. Start typing your legal business name in the **Business Name *** box.
4. Choose your business type, such as local storefront, online only, or other.
5. Enter a phone number, contact info, and physical address, if applicable.
6. Verify your business. Google will provide instructions via phone, email, or message.
7. Once verified, customize your business profile with photos, operating hours, etc.

It takes virtually no time at all to snap clear photos and short videos while on the water and post them to your social media pages. Creativity adds pizzazz and makes your business more memorable to consumers—follow the trends! Consider asking your children, grandchildren, or family members for help!

To maximize success, take the time to understand the age, schedules, and spending habits of your loyal customers. Decide if you want to reach a new customer demographic and think about how best to reach them. Use analytics to track what kinds of posts receive the most interactions. Ultimately, creating and sticking to a brand strategy provides legitimacy to your business and product. Visit the [ECSCGA marketing page](#) to explore a large collection of resources to improve your oyster marketing efforts!

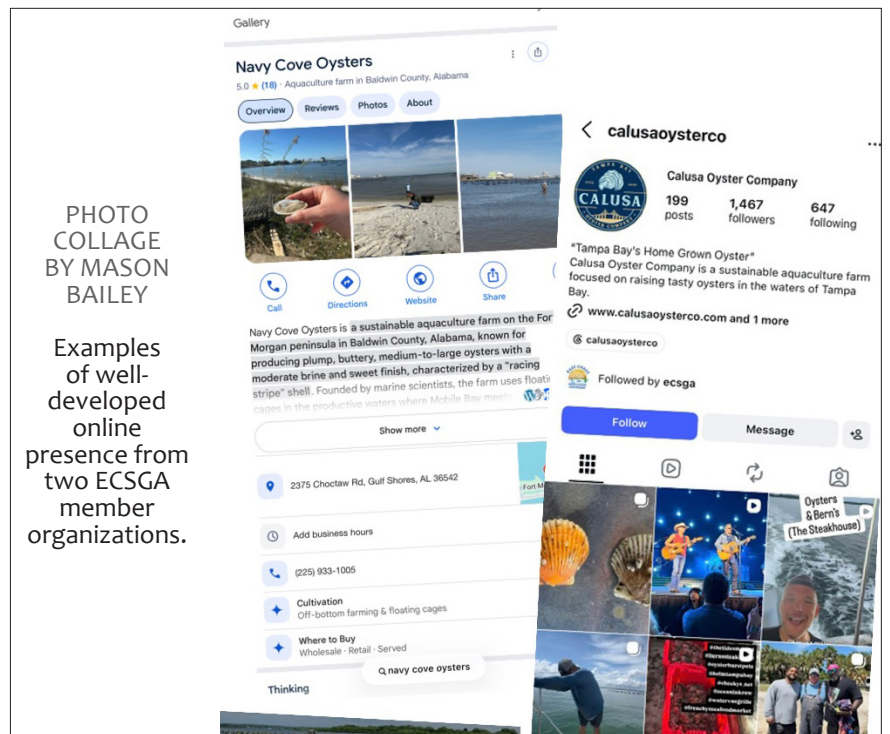


PHOTO COLLAGE BY MASON BAILEY

Examples of well-developed online presence from two ECSCGA member organizations.

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Impromptu Roundtable Brings High-Powered Fed and State Officials to North Carolina

by Chris Matteo, Owner, Chadwick Creek Oysters and Seed Nursery, Pamlico County, North Carolina

On June 1, U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Brooke L. Rollins and Acting U.S. Secretary of Labor Keith Sonderling headed up a roundtable discussion that took place on a family farm in New Bern, North Carolina (my hometown). The verbal invite to attend was very unusual, as I wasn't given any specifics until a day or two before the event, for security reasons.

Also taking part in the roundtable were North Carolina Commissioner of Agriculture Steve Troxler, North Carolina Commissioner of Labor Luke Farley, five row-crop farmers, two oyster farmers from Pamlico County (Alex Adams from Lighthouse Shoal Oyster Co. and me), and Executive Director of the North Carolina Fisheries Association Glenn Skinner (my commercial-fishing counterpart).

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OYSTERS	20+	500%+	1,000%+	150%	300-500	~70
CHICKEN BREAST	26	7%	2%	3%	20	~140
BEEF (SIRLOIN)	22	46%	40%	15%	40	~170
SALMON	19	7%	110%	4%	1,100-1,500	~160

*Percent Daily Values (DV) based on a 2,000 calorie diet. Sources: USDA FoodData Central, NIH, Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health

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CHRIS MATTEO/CHATGPT

Chris Matteo handed out copies of this infographic to the federal and state officials who attended the aquaculture roundtable. MAHA In a Shell!

The audience was made up of a Who's Who of politicians, leaders and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) folks, along with the requisite Secret Service agents—about 40 people in total. Notably, there were candidates running for Congress in our U.S. House District 1 (Laurie Buckhout) and for U.S. Senator (Mike Watley, running to replace Senator Thom Tillis). State senators and representatives also showed up, along with in-district managers for sitting U.S. representatives and senators.

We went around the table, letting each person speak in turn, and luckily, I was in the second-to-last spot (next to Labor Commissioner Farley) so I spoke the longest. I had also done a lot of prep work, so as not to waste this unique opportunity. The rest of the participants seemed to be speaking totally off the cuff.

It had been rumored that U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., would be attending, as he had been traveling with Secretary Rollins the week prior visiting farms, so part of my prep work was producing the Nature's Multivitamin infographic using ChatGPT. (My guess is he didn't come to North Carolina

because he had sued the largest hog farm in the state many times for environmental infractions.) Nevertheless, Secretary Rollins was still talking MAHA (Make America Healthy Again) even without RFK, Jr.

To make my quick, (7-minute) presentation memorable, when we all sat down at the table I pulled two beautiful oysters out of my satchel and placed them next to my name plate while the secretaries were looking my way. Secretary Rollins got a big kick out of this and mentioned it during my presentation.

Since the event took place in essentially an open-sided Quonset hut with no room for high tech equipment, I used printouts from a Power Point deck I had prepared in advance, focusing on the following points:

American Seafood First: China Dominates Seafood Farming While U.S. Misses the Boat

- The U.S. trade deficit for seafood has grown to \$20-25 billion a year.
- Global population has grown from 2.5 billion in 1950 to 8.3 billion in 2026, a 232% increase.

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NOAA Strengthens Commitment To Aquaculture Through New Cooperative Institute

More Than \$13M Invested In Research Partnerships To Bolster American Seafood Competitiveness

by NOAA Fisheries

On June 8, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) announced the University of New Hampshire as host institution for the new NOAA Cooperative Institute Fostering Aquaculture Research and Markets (CIFARM) to expand NOAA's impact and strengthen efforts to boost American seafood competitiveness.

After a highly competitive application process, this new five-year cooperative institute will harness partnerships with cutting-edge researchers to advance American marine aquaculture. Approximately \$13,500,000 will be available this year for projects following the establishment of CIFARM.

"The United States is finally recognizing aquaculture as a vital complement to our world-class fisheries," said Neil Jacobs, Ph.D., NOAA administrator. "We look forward to collaborating with these exemplary partners to continue to unlock the potential of this industry in the United States."

CIFARM researchers will investigate solutions that can be leveraged for industry advancement, such as:

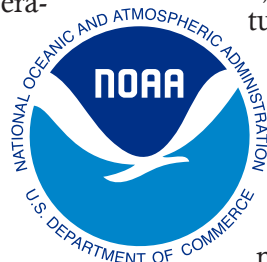
- ❑ Marine aquaculture demonstration projects;
- ❑ Engineering and technology development;
- ❑ Artificial intelligence for aquaculture;
- ❑ Environmental observations and forecasting;
- ❑ Risk management and vulnerability analysis; and
- ❑ Seafood markets research.

These research priorities will also magnify scientific advancement through education, outreach, and engagement.

"We are excited to partner with NOAA on this first-of-its kind cooperative institute to advance American aquaculture," said Elizabeth Chilton, Ph.D., president of the University of New Hampshire. "By leveraging our coalition's scientific excellence and regional expertise, we are poised to make great strides for the aquaculture industry."

University of New Hampshire has partnered with a diverse suite of outstanding academic,

industry, and non-governmental organization partners, including: New Hampshire Sea Grant, the University of Miami, Florida Sea Grant, University of Southern Mississippi, Mississippi-Alabama Sea Grant Consortium, Hubbs-Sea World Research Institute, California Sea Grant, University of Hawaii, and Hawaii Sea Grant.



"By investing in aquaculture research and markets, NOAA Fisheries continues its commitment to improving sustainable American fisheries through science-based management," said Eugenio Piñeiro Soler, assistant administrator for NOAA Fisheries. "We are proud to empower the industry to produce more seafood for American plates."

Americans eat \$24.2 billion in imported seafood each year, about half of which is estimated to be farmed in other countries. Aquaculture creates jobs, uplifts coastal economies, and complements wild-capture fisheries, while providing healthy and sustainable seafood to American families and bolstering domestic food security.

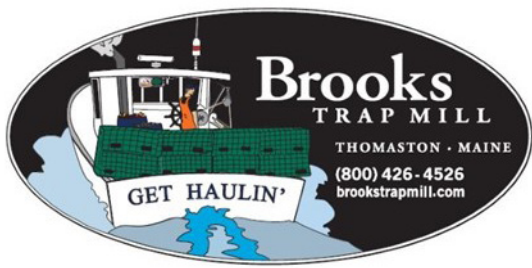
Congress directed the establishment of a new cooperative institute advancing U.S. marine aquaculture development in Fiscal Year 2024 Congressional appropriations. By providing scientific solutions for the aquaculture industry, NOAA's effort also helps fulfill the 2020 Executive Order on Promoting American Seafood Competitiveness and Economic Growth and supports President Trump's 2025 Executive Order Restoring American Seafood Competitiveness.

NOAA Aquaculture Program's mission is to provide science, services, and policies that create conditions for opportunity and growth of sustainable U.S. aquaculture. This long-term collaborative partnership will promote research, education, training, and outreach aligned with this mission.



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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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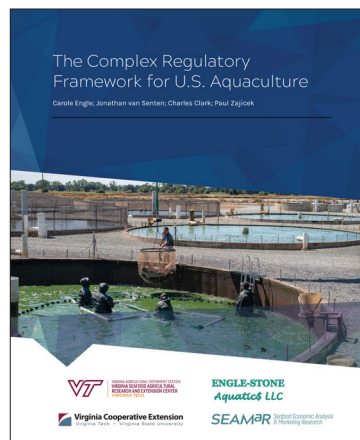
Editor: Ann Kane Rheault

New Analysis Shows How Regulations Constrain U.S. Aquaculture Growth

The Virginia Seafood Agricultural Research and Extension Center (VSAREC) has posted a comprehensive bulletin, written by Carole Engle, Jonathan van Senten, Charles Clark, and Paul Zajick entitled "[The Complex Regulatory Framework for U.S. Aquaculture.](#)"

The bulletin describes the complex layers of the U.S. regulatory framework that U.S. aquaculture producers must navigate.

The regulatory framework for aquaculture in the U.S. has been described as one of the most stringent in the world, with at least 29 congressional acts governing aquaculture farm operations (siting, management, and operation). The bulletin summarizes the limited literature on federal or state regulations and one notable paper that quantified the frequency of the words "shall," "must," "may not," "prohibited," or "required" in the United States Code of Federal Regulations governing farmed seafood. Those authors estimated there were **170,000 restrictions**, with almost half directed towards production-related activities. U.S. aquaculture producers for many years have pointed to overly redundant and complex regulations that have led to extensive permitting delays, high costs of compliance, closure of aquaculture businesses, and reduced competitiveness in the large U.S. seafood market.



The nine regulatory cost analyses in this bulletin found the national compliance burden in 2023 was \$196 million (9% to 30% of total annual costs among the nine aquaculture sectors). **Total annual revenue lost because of regulations was \$807 million**, indicating that U.S. aquaculture and its economic benefits could have been 36% greater. Overall, 43% of regulations identified on U.S. aquaculture farms were federal, 47% were state, 2% were state-enforced federal mandates, 6% were local (municipality, county, district), and fewer than 1% were tribal regulations. The regulatory cost burden has become one of the top five costs on U.S. aquaculture farms, with a disproportionately greater negative effect on smaller-scale farms. Combined with revenue lost from regulatory action, the U.S. regulatory framework has contributed to the slow growth of U.S. aquaculture and significant national food security risk. In 2023, the United States imported \$25 billion worth of seafood representing 80% of the seafood consumed in the United States and creating a \$20 billion trade deficit.

The bulletin is a valuable tool to inform and alert the public, state and federal agencies, and legislative bodies to the extreme regulatory costs and complexities borne by the U.S. aquaculture community. This article was published on the Virginia Cooperative Extension website on May 29, 2026. Virginia Cooperative Extension is a partnership of Virginia Tech, Virginia State University, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), and local governments.

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State Marine Aquaculture Policy Dashboard

by By Stephanie Otts, Director, National Sea Grant Law Center, University of Mississippi School of Law

In 2024, the National Sea Grant Law Center at the University of Mississippi School of Law and Lester Lab at Florida State University launched the [State Marine Aquaculture Policy Dashboard](#), a first-of-its-kind interactive tool that allows users to explore and compare marine aquaculture policy data across all 23 marine coastal states.

The Dashboard is a database and data visualization tool that increases the accessibility and usability of state marine aquaculture policy data. Covering data for over 40 legislative, policy, and management attributes related to marine aquaculture, it includes information on key policy areas such as management authority, leasing requirements, biosecurity protections, and capacity building programs. The information in the dashboard is updated annually in consultation with aquaculture managers in each state (data last reviewed in September 2025). The dashboard is an important tool to build our understanding of state aquaculture policies and to help identify specific policy gaps and solutions to address them.

The project team is in the process of adding data for five U.S. territories and additional policy attributes related to farming operations and environmental issues. A user guide and walk-through video tutorials are available on the [National Sea Grant Law Center's state marine aquaculture policy project webpage](#).

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The screenshot displays a grid of policy categories with their respective sub-topics:

- Biosecurity:** Genetic Reqs: Reproductive Capabilities, Species Moratoriums, Native Species Requirements, Genetic Requirements: Local Populations
- Capacity Building:** Pilot Leases, Pilot Permits, Supportive Initiatives, Training Programs, Farmer Loan and Grant Programs
- Farming Operations:** Insurance Requirements, Active-Use Requirements, Infrastructure Access, Bonding Requirements
- Leasing Information:** Leasing Requirements, Lease Renewal Cost, Annual Lease Fee, Public Consultation, Maximum Lease Term, Lease Transfers, Subleasing Permitted
- Legislation and Regulations:** Development Act or Comprehensive Legislation, Marine Aquaculture Provisions, Non-comprehensive Legislation, Right to Farm Statute, Regulatory Guidance
- Management Authority:** Same Agency for Marine Fisheries and Aquaculture, Same Agency for Freshwater and Marine Aquaculture, Centralized Government Website, Gov Website: Permitting, Gov Website: Leasing, Government Contact
- Spatial Management:** Zoning for Marine Aquaculture, Map of Existing/Pending Lease Permits, Non-Comprehensive Multi-Use MSP, Aquaculture Siting Tools
- Sustainability:** Climate Change Policy, Aquaculture BMPs, Marine Aquaculture BMPs
- Tribal Authority:** Tribal Consultation, Tribal Leasing, Tribal Approval

A screen shot of one of the pages of the interactive dashboard with live links. In addition to the interactive tools, visitors can access the entire data set (in the form of a massive Google spreadsheet) that powers the dashboard by clicking on the [Navigate to Supporting Data Table](#) link. The spreadsheet contains data for 23 states (rows) with sections for Legislation and Regulation, Management Authority, Leasing Information, Farming Operations, Spatial Management Tools, Biosecurity, Sustainability, Tribal Authority, and Capacity Building. You can scroll down to your state and click on links that explain regulatory guidance, permits and licenses, leasing requirements, and much more.

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USDA Issues Disaster Declaration to Provide Relief for NY Aquaculture Industry

Allows Eligible Producers in Suffolk and Nassau Counties to Apply for Low-Interest Emergency Loans and Disaster Assistance

by New York Governor's Press Office

On May 26, New York Governor Kathy Hochul announced that the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) had issued a Secretarial Disaster Designation for Suffolk County following her request to provide relief to the aquaculture industry. Heavy snowfall and multi-week severe freeze conditions significantly impacted the county's aquaculture grower operations in February 2026, with producers facing an estimated combined \$2.4 million loss. The Disaster Designation now allows affected farms in Suffolk County and contiguous Nassau County to apply for disaster assistance and low-interest emergency loans.

"Early last month, I urged the USDA to take swift action to declare Suffolk County a disaster area and help our aquaculture growers get the assistance they need to recover and move forward," Governor Hochul said. "With this Secretarial Disaster Declaration, the producers who have seen economic loss can now take advantage of low-interest loans to help ensure they're able to sustain their operations. I have long been committed to helping this important agricultural sector grow and thrive, and the State will continue to support the industry through this hardship."

Prolonged freezing temperatures, heavy snowfall, and extensive ice formation across coastal waters this February prevented oyster farmers from accessing shellfish growing areas and conducting normal harvesting and farm operations. Ice accumulation across bays and waterways blocked access to vessels and aquaculture sites for extended periods of time and caused damage to aquaculture gear, vessels, and farm infrastructure. A survey conducted by industry partners and local officials estimated that many growers are facing a more than 30% loss in production, and those who reported damage to racks, lines, and vessels are facing estimated repair and replacement costs totaling \$2,396,500.

State Agriculture Commissioner Richard A. Ball and State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) Commissioner Amanda Lefton toured a number of impacted businesses on Long Island on April 8 to better understand the extent of the damage.

stand the extent of the damage.

Commissioner Ball said, "The damage our shellfish growers saw this winter was unprecedented, with severe damage costing them millions of dollars. I am thankful to the Governor for her ongoing support of the industry and request to the USDA for this Secretarial Disaster Declaration. By elevating our concerns to the USDA, our growers will now have access to emergency loans that will offer financial relief to area farmers."

Commissioner Amanda Lefton said, "The shellfish aquaculture populations across Long Island's coastal waters were devastated during winter weather, impacting growers who rely on these resources for their livelihoods.... DEC encourages impacted business owners to submit fishery revenue information and landing reports as the next step in obtaining a potential NOAA Fishery Disaster Declaration."

Assemblymember Michaelle Solages noted that, "Long Island's aquaculture industry is a critical part of both our coastal economy, as well as our local identity. This industry supports small businesses and working waterfront communities across Nassau and Suffolk Counties.... As climate-related weather events continue to place increasing pressure on coastal industries, we must remain com-



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Extensive ice made oyster farming difficult in Great Peconic Bay, between the north and south forks of Long Island in New York's Suffolk County this past winter. Farmers in Nassau County, New York; New London County, Connecticut; and Washington County, Rhode Island, are also eligible for low-interest emergency loans and disaster relief from the freeze, ice floes, and tidal surge that affected the area from 1/26/26 to 2/23/26.

mitted to protecting the workers and businesses that sustain Long Island's maritime economy."

Suffolk County Executive Ed Romaine said, "This is great news as those who make their

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Incoming Executive Director

and wildlife interactions on farms. These initiatives helped states adopt more adaptive, practical approaches that work for farms of all sizes and business models.

These issues were often complex and sometimes contentious, but the relationships built along the way, with state shellfish programs,

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NOAA, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Food and Drug Administration, the Centers for Disease Control, and partners in Washington, D.C., have endured because my approach has always been grounded in openness, sound science, practical management experience, and a clear understanding of what effective industry support requires.

Outside of work, I live in Rhode Island with my wonderful wife and our 7-year-old son. Rhode Island's working waterfronts, aquaculture businesses, and coastal traditions have shaped our daily life, and I'm grateful to be able to support an industry that is so intertwined with the place we call home.

In 2025, I transitioned from public service to the private sector, motivated not by dissatisfaction but by the recognition that the shellfish industry is entering a period of both significant challenge and tremendous opportunity. That shift broadened my perspective even further, adding experience in market development, communications, and strategic

planning—skills that will be essential as the ECSGA continues to advocate for a thriving, resilient, and innovative shellfish sector along the East and Gulf Coasts.

As I step into this role, I look forward to working closely with the board of directors and our membership to build on the ECSGA's existing priorities and identify new areas of focus to strengthen the industry's future. Whether advancing regulatory improvements, supporting market expansion, elevating the ecosystem benefits of shellfish farming, or ensuring growers' voices are heard at the state and federal levels, my goal is to help the ECSGA remain a powerful, effective champion for its members.

I am grateful for the opportunity to serve this community and eager to get to work. Together, we will continue to ensure that East Coast shellfish growers have the support, tools, and advocacy needed to thrive in the years ahead.

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Farm Service Agency: A Resource for Growers

by Robert B. Rheault,
ECSGA Executive Director

I had a chance to sit down with Rob Sullivan, State Executive Director for the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Farm Service Agency (FSA), to learn more about him, the FSA, and his thoughts about shellfish farming. For a little background, Rob is a lifelong Rhode Islander who grew up in Westerly. For the past 20 years he has run a landscaping company, designing and building outdoor living spaces. He told me he has always been involved in public service and served on the board of his Chamber of Commerce, supporting local small businesses.

Rob was approached in 2025 to take over the FSA director position when the Trump administration took the reins, and says he was

“beyond excited” for the opportunity to help grow and protect local farmers. “My job as State FSA Director is to oversee day-to-day operations in Rhode Island and Connecticut, and ensure President Trump’s America First agenda is a reality in rural areas across the country. At FSA, we support our farmers by offering disaster assistance programs and farm loan programs,” he explained.

Rob noted that the FSA offers a variety of programs to help farmers recover from natural disaster events. “We offer programs for livestock assistance, crop losses, and farmland damage. We also offer direct and guaranteed loans to farmers and ranchers to promote, build, and sustain family farms.”

Most of the shellfish-growing community knows that FSA offers affordable (or free) crop disaster assistance, but may not know that shellfish are considered both a crop and livestock. For decades shellfish growers have had access to the Noninsured Disaster As-

sistance Program (NAP), and more recently to the Emergency Assistance for Livestock, Honeybees, and Farm-Raised Fish Program (ELAP). Both programs cover loss of inventory due to natural disasters. For NAP, producers must sign up for coverage by September 30 to be covered for the ensuing year, register their crop acreage, and pay a small fee (usually \$325). ELAP is free, and you are automatically enrolled if you sign up for NAP. The ECSGA advises every grower to sign up. It is the cheapest disaster assistance program you will ever find.

NAP and ELAP each have different coverage levels based on the percentage of your overall loss. NAP coverage is triggered by losses exceeding 50%, whereas ELAP covers any loss exceeding the average mortality rate. Payments are determined by the loss percentage and the fair market value for the size of the shellfish that are lost. Both programs pro-

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Impromptu North Carolina Roundtable

- ❑ Global wild-caught fishery landings plateaued in the early 1980s.
- ❑ China has aggressively scaled aquaculture, becoming the dominant producer while attempting to keep up with growing global demand.
- ❑ America possesses some of the best shellfish-growing waters on earth.
- ❑ Few states combine the scale of protected, shallow estuarine waters; favorable salinity; year-round growing season; and aquaculture suitability that North Carolina possesses.
- ❑ Due to an ongoing Canadian oyster die-off, there is an immediate opportunity to grow U.S. shellfish production by around 30% (from \$200 million to \$260 million annually) for the domestic market, replacing Canadian imports.
- ❑ **Win-win-win-win:** Shellfish farming presents a rare opportunity where economic growth, public health, environmental improvement, and domestic seafood production are all aligned; and it attracts strong bipartisan support.
- ❑ Oysters and clams are the most nutritious animal protein one can consume, second only to beef liver (See graphic above right).

If the U.S. government fails to promote the growth of its domestic aquaculture industry, American consumers will continue to grow our seafood trade deficit!

The following points landed particularly well with participants:

1. We don't want to eat Chinese-grown seafood (the labor secretary literally blurted out something like, "Oh heck no, their standards are terrible.")
2. People wanted to know more about the Canadian oyster die-off from MSX and the resulting market opportunity for U.S. producers. I explained that we had selectively bred around those diseases decades ago.
3. Despite being an oyster fan, Agriculture Secretary

Rollins had no idea of their nutritional value. She said that with our current protein gap and emphasis on MAHA, this is great. At the post-event we discussed "getting U.S. consumers eating oysters on a Tuesday night," but I pointed out that we would need more value-added processing to make that happen.

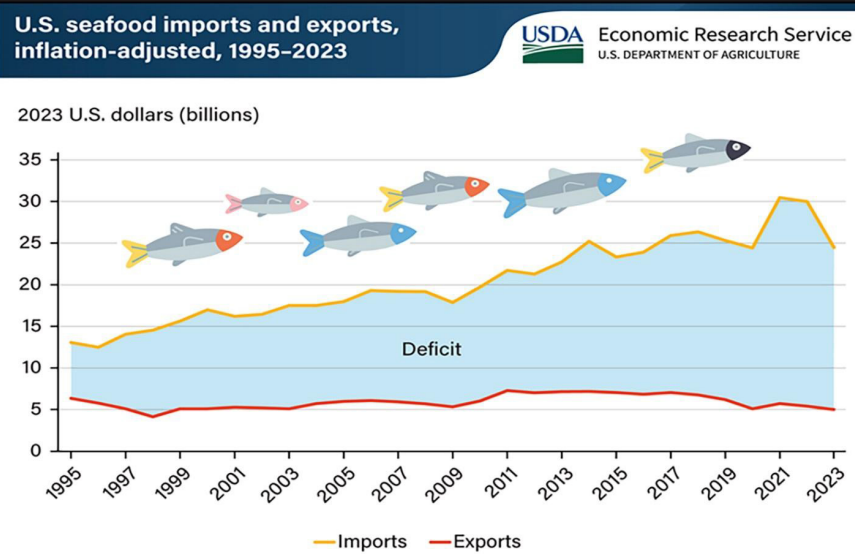
I stressed the importance of having the causes of loss that are covered by USDA disaster programs actually match up with whatever is causing mass mortalities. In an ideal world, if the programs are meant to keep farmers farming, all mass-mortality events should be covered (as long as they are not a result of poor husbandry).

I also stressed that lumping all farm-raised fish together in the covered causes of loss did not reflect the wide range of aquaculture being used—recirculating aquaculture systems (RAS), ponds, mariculture, etc.—and the need to immediately add drought and salinity extremes to our covered causes of loss. Secretary Rollins indicated that she can help us fix these problems. I also stressed that we need to give aquaculture a prominent role in the USDA Office of Seafood, which has not been addressing our industry up to this point.

After the event there was a press conference with us farmers standing behind the secretaries, and after that press conference I handed out the printout of my presentation to Secretary Rollins and several others, including the political candidates. Shawn Harding, president of the North Carolina Farm Bureau, congratulated me afterwards, saying that I had "really elevated shellfish aquaculture today."

Secretary Rollins followed up the next day with an email to the farmers on the panel. I replied quickly, and followed up soon thereafter to continue to press the ECSGA agenda and the ELAP (Emergency Assistance for Livestock, Honeybees and Farm-raised Fish) issues.




Chris Matteo serves as the president of the North Carolina Shellfish Growers Association, and the vice president of the East Coast Shellfish Growers Association.



The U.S. trade deficit for seafood has grown to \$20–25 billion a year. China has aggressively scaled its aquaculture production, becoming the dominant producer while attempting to keep up with growing global demand.

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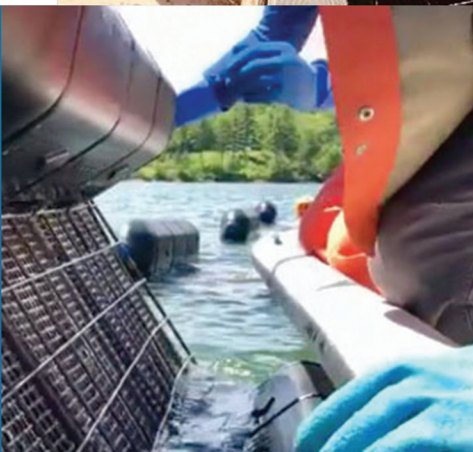
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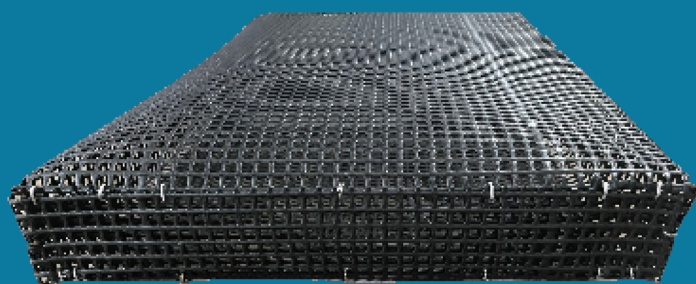
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Aquatic Diagnostic Lab Services

The Aquatic Diagnostic Laboratory (ADL) at Roger Williams University (RWU) in Bristol, Rhode Island, researches diseases of aquatic animals, and provides disease diagnostic services to the aquaculture industry, extension agents, and regulators in Rhode Island and other Northeastern states. RWU undergraduate students are trained in aquatic animal health diagnostic and care methods by using a combination of pathological and molecular approaches. Research includes a focus on the occurrence of neoplasia in hard clams

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—Continued from page 12 Farm Service Agency

protect against unpredictable losses when adverse weather conditions strike. To qualify, growers must have records documenting seed purchases and crop sales in order to estimate pre-disaster inventories using grower records and pre-established background mortality estimates.

After this crazy winter, Rob and I had a long talk about whether growers who failed to take proper precautions against ice should be reimbursed for their loss. The FSA won't pay corn farmers who don't take reasonable steps to protect their crops, so there is some question as to whether shellfish farmers who are not following [best practices](#) should qualify. We didn't answer the question, but it was an interesting conversation.

FSA's farm loan programs help farmers and ranchers obtain commercial credit at well below market rates. FSA offers direct and guaranteed loans to farmers and ranchers to promote, build, and sustain family farms for a thriving agricultural economy. Farm ownership, operating, and emergency loans are available under the Direct Loan Program, while farm ownership, operat-

ing, and conservation loans are available under the Guaranteed Loan Program.

Many aquaculture producers use FSA loan programs for access to capital when traditional lenders are wary. Decades ago, I was able to get a commercial bank loan and line of credit thanks to a loan guarantee from FSA, and I am not sure that Moonstone Oysters would have survived without it! Rob notes that information on eligibility, and loan fact sheets can be found on the website under the [Loans](#) tab at farmers.gov.

I asked Rob how he likes the job, and he said, "Every day, I leave my office knowing I am helping farmers. The programs we administer at Farm Service Agency have a profound impact on our local farms. We foster strong working relationships with our farmers, and that is incredibly fulfilling. I especially enjoy meeting with growers, seeing their farms and learning about their needs. I get to work on improving our programs to better meet their needs. As director, I try to empower my employees to strive for excellence in the work they do. Helping farmers is my favorite part of this job. Touring oyster leases and sampling their crops is a close second!"

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NY Disaster Declaration

living on the water in Suffolk County are committed to seeing their industries flourish. These funds will help our oyster growers recover from a brutal winter that destroyed costly equipment. The shell fishing industry is part of Suffolk County's history, and we all have to do all we can to keep this important business viable and growing."

This USDA disaster designation makes farm operators in Suffolk County and Nassau County, as a contiguous county, eligible to be considered for emergency loans from the USDA's Farm Service Agency, provided eligibility requirements are met. Farmers in eligible counties have eight months from the date of the disaster declaration to apply for relief programs. Farmers can contact their local FSA office here: [Find Your Local USDA Service Center](#).

In addition, the DEC encourages the aquaculture industry to continue to submit landing reports to their office to assist with a National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Federal Fisheries Disaster Designation evaluation for this weather event. AGM and DEC also continue to meet as part of an interagency workgroup that is following this severe weather event and collecting damage reports.

To find out more about industry support and resources, visit the [New York Department of Agriculture and Markets page on Aquaculture & Wild-Caught Seafood](#).

Editor's Note: According to the USDA's Farm Service Agency, as contiguous counties, New London County, Connecticut, and Washington County, Rhode Island, are also eligible for low-interest emergency loans and disaster relief from the freeze, ice floes, and tidal surge that affected the area from 1/26/26–2/23/26. The application deadline is 12/21/2026. For more info visit the [Disaster Assistance Discovery Tool](#), [Disaster Assistance-at-a-Glance fact sheet](#), and [Loan Assistance Tool](#). To file a Notice of Loss or to ask questions about available programs, contact your local [USDA Service Center](#).

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Billion Oyster Party
Thursday, September 24, 2026
6-10 p.m.

Liberty Warehouse, Red Hook, Brooklyn, NYC

On September 24, 2026, join Billion Oyster Project, our partners, and more than 1,500 guests for an evening celebrating the people helping to shape the future of New York Harbor. Known to participating farms for a decade as “Oyster Prom,” NYC’s most highly anticipated oyster bash of the year will feature freshly shucked oysters from farms around 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.

Hosted at Liberty Warehouse in Brooklyn,

our annual party brings together the growers, scientists, restoration practitioners, chefs, celebrities, supporters, and community leaders behind one of the nation’s most ambitious urban restoration efforts. It’s an opportunity to connect with fellow farmers, share your oysters, and be part of an evening dedicated to the future of our harbor.

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. We’re looking for people to donate, bring, and shuck approximately 700 oysters each.



Further details will be provided during sign up. If you’re interested in participating, reach out to Malcolm Provost at mprovost@billionoysterproject.org to learn more or to reserve your spot.

For more info and to purchase tickets visit billionoysterparty.org.



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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

Coming Events

Gulf & South Atlantic Shellfish Conference. July 28–30. Visit www.issc.org/event.

International Conference on Molluscan Shellfish Safety. Sept. 6–11. The Forum at Exeter University, Exeter, UK. Visit www.icmss.net.

International Conference on Shellfish Restoration. Oct. 4–8. Little Creek Casino Resort, Shelton, WA. Visit www.shellfish-society.org/icsr2026.html.

Aquaculture America 2027. Feb. 21-24. Hawaii Convention Center, Honolulu, Hawaii. Visit was.org/meeting/code/AA2027.

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