

The Partnership for a Resilient Apalachicola Bay
Community Workshop
Apalachicola National Estuarine Research Reserve
July 31, 2024
5:30 – 7:30 pm
Minutes

On July 31, 2024, The Partnership for a Resilient Apalachicola Bay hosted a Community Workshop to engage with local citizens on the oyster population status, restoration, and management progress in Apalachicola Bay. Dr. Sandra Brooke (FSU) gave a report on the Apalachicola Bay System Initiative's (ABSI's) research progress, as well as an overview of their pending shell recycling program to be launched in Franklin and Wakulla County. Devin Resko (FWC) gave an update on the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's restoration work (partnered with the National Fish and Wildlife Federation). Questions were welcomed throughout the reports from Partnership members and community attendees. There were 32 people in attendance, including the Partnership members and presenters.

Below is a quick synopsis of the meeting. For any questions, please email Betty Webb at betty@partnershipforapalachbay.org.

Open Remarks and Welcome

- Otlice Amison (Chair of The Partnership) called the meeting to order
- Betty Webb (Facilitator) presented The Partnership webpage (<https://www.partnershipforapalachbay.org>)
- Meeting Schedule:
 - o Meetings are currently held last Wednesday of the month
 - o The August meeting day may be changed
 - o The last meeting for Phase I is set for September 25th – Location TBD
- The Partnership Members were introduced (find them here: <https://www.partnershipforapalachbay.org/members/>)
- Marketing Campaign
 - o Initial stages
 - The goal is to get material out to the community
 - Everyone at the Community Workshop received a sticker
- Administrative Updates
 - o The Partnership is a non-profit registered with the state of Florida
 - o Currently in the process of becoming a 501(c)3
 - o In October, The Partnership will receive funding from a different source. It is imperative to keep the work moving forward.

Presentation on Condition of Oysters and Shell Recycling Plan – Dr. Sandra

- Observation and Condition Of Oysters
 - o Four years worth of tonging data for surveys of sites (17 areas, 66 sampling sites)
 - Oysters are increasing since the fishery closure

- Oysters are found predominantly in the limestone restoration planted areas
 - Seeing a consistent increase in the number of oysters in each size class on each side of the bay
 - East Bay doing better than West Bay
 - Five sites have over 300 bags/ acre – all located on the eastern side of the bay
 - 300 bags/acre is the threshold for a limited-entry fishery
- Dr. Brooke did some “back of the envelope” math to calculate the number of bags available for harvest (13,324)
 - Assuming a 5 day work week:
 - 5 harvesters @ 5 bags/day can each work for ~2 years
 - 10 harvesters @ 10 bags/ day can each work for ~6 months
 - 20 harvesters @ 20 bags/day can each work for ~7 weeks
 - Currently there are not enough oysters to have an open fishery, the fishery would be in trouble again in weeks
- ABSI Pilot Shell Recycling Project
 - The original shelling program shut down in 2011
 - The problem – not necessarily the funding, but they couldn’t get the shell
 - The verbiage is still in the literature that FDACS owns a percentage of the shells that are taken from the Bay, but shells harvested from other harvest locations are not covered
 - Offer Your Shells to Enhance Restoration (O.Y.S.T.E.R.)
 - Current program with restaurants in Franklin County to keep the top shell of oysters shucked – cured for a year – placed on intertidal reefs
 - Aiming to expand for Wakulla Co. to retain at least top shells, if not bottom
 - Place collection bins at local events and festivals
 - Collect bins and cure at FSUCML
 - Pay oystermen to place shells on subtidal reefs
- Natural reefs likely have legal oysters, but the density is very low on the natural reefs
- West Bay has higher salinity, here is where we see more crown conch
- Dry Bar used to pop out of the water, but no longer does. Dr. Brooke thinks the oysters are being heavily preyed upon
 - When salinity is above 25ppt, you start to see physiological problems in the oysters and they are more susceptible to predators
 - Roger Mathis (RM): when the Bay started dying, it started dying there first
 - Rickey Banks: 99% of the oysters harvested here are sold on the half shell and they aren’t sold here, they are sold in Daytona, Orlando, etc – how are we gonna get shells back if the fishery opens back up? This was a problem before and it’s gonna be a problem in the future.
- Community Member: Are there restaurants doing the shelling program now? We need to encourage people to do more
- Joe Taylor (Franklin’s Promise): It’s about volume. We run the program in Santa Rosa. One restaurant in Pensacola does 19 90-gallon garbage cans full in one week. The scale

in Apalachicola is not the same, but the cost is the same. There is a lot of potential, but we also need community buy-in. We had five cans at the start, but now only have 3 because it wasn't worth the cost.

- Wayne Williams: Question about disease – if we get shells from other locations, does the curing time kill any potential disease? Answer: Different states have different regulations about the time required for curing to ensure that there isn't spread of disease.
 - o Also are there options for purchasing shell from out of state or out of country – that might be something to consider.
- The threat of chemicals in the water is something that needs to be considered, big risk for us, need to include a paragraph somewhere (in the restoration and management Plan) about the risks of the chemicals. We have no control over the amount that comes down from that dam, but we need to be aware and band together to work against it.
- RM: Whatever comes down that river, is gonna be what is in the Bay. Doesn't matter what is out in that bay, if freshwater doesn't come down it'll kill the oysters
- Community member: Oyster shells are the focus, but tons of clam shells are shucked and are not in as high of demand. Maybe they should be considered for restoration.
 - o Dr. Brooke: Good point, other programs are collecting clam shells and other molluscs. We should look into it.
- How do you quantify the area that is mud versus where the oysters can grow?
 - o ABSI did random sampling of both hard bottom and mud for the preliminary studies
 - o For the calculations for this presentation – the points were taken on all hard bottom locations so they could be extrapolated out from there
 - Tong licks weren't done in mud, it was really in hard bottom/ gravel, so zeros were more about oysters not being there than not being able to grow there.
- Franklin's Promise built five sites with recycled concrete in an intertidal area near the high school if folks want to go look at them.

Bay Restoration/ Pilot Study/ Future Management – Devin Resko

- FWC Oyster Monitoring
 - o Divers collect material from the bottom – data on weight, live oysters, dead oysters, etc.
 - o Mapped hard substrate to inform restoration efforts – 3d mapping, bottom profile, ground truthing
- Oyster Reef Conditions in Apalachicola Bay
 - o Recent mapping shows 2000 acres of potential habitat
- Large-Scale Pilot Study (based on NFWF requirements)
 - o Required due to restoration not performing as well as expected
 - o FWRI will monitor the restoration efforts
 - o Developed location based on SONAR, ground truthing, checking with stakeholders, and cross-checking where current oysters are
 - o Testing multiple reef heights (1 ft versus 2 ft)
 - o The material is Kentucky Blue Limestone

- Not using large rock that is unable to be tonged – cost prohibitive and not popular with stakeholders
 - 4-8 inches (plus or minus 1 inch) – contractor on the side of 3-6 inches
 - Shell is not a viable option for the size and scale of this project
 - Each reef will be one acre in size (Phase 1, multiple sites)
 - Exhaust the \$10 million state allocation
 - Increases the scientific scope of restoration when paired with the research work of ABSI and FSU
 - Phase 2 – 6-inch larger area on Cat Point
 - Phase 3 – 6-inch larger area near XX
 - Total Acreage = 77 acres of restoration work
 - Contractor has increased effort to smooth out any high points discovered from mapping – doing robust side-scan mapping to find any high points
 - All restored sites will have sufficient navigational clearance
 - Any areas that are uncertain at this time will be marked off with buoys
- Fishery Management
 - FWC is continuing to gather feedback
 - Continuing to monitor and analyze biodata
 - Most recent monitoring efforts have shown improvements where restoration has occurred
 - Decisions on future restoration and reopening of the Bay will be data-informed as well as include public input
 - FWC will increase stakeholder engagement efforts in the coming months
 - Actively researching additional funding opportunities
- Devin has maps of all restoration work being done and all the GPS points of the sites if folks are interested or in need of them
- Dan Ellinor (FWC): They are working on a fiscal request, talk with your legislators about the need for this money, and the need for money every year to continue to restore the Bay and maintain the program
- Betty: The members of the Partnership – are y'all ok with prepping letters to reach out to representatives for fiscal support for the program, and letters of support for the program – Betty receives approval from the Partnership members present
- Dan Ellinor: FWC is currently adding a marine team member that will be based in Eastpoint and work specifically with oysters
- Community Member: The rocks are too big, we're going to have problems with them. 4'' will be better for tonging, which will limit catch and the number of oysters people are able to catch. We don't need to limit our abilities in the future, you can't imagine what the Bay was capable of.
 - The oysters create a huge network of jobs – if we limit the number of people that can be out there – we limit the whole network – we need that back – and we can get that back
 - We think the bay is gonna come back just fine, just need the right material, in the right location, it'll be ok.

- Kentucky Blue is good material, RESTORE sites held up during the hurricanes and storms.
- Update on Oyster Poaching
 - FWC has been hearing from stakeholders that there is poaching going on and that people are seeing it, all information goes to FWC Law Enforcement (FWCLE)
 - FWCLE is increasing their presence, officers out there patrolling, and cases have been made, but there is not a lot.
 - Every time FWCLE is on the Bay, they are in the shellfish areas
 - What they need from the community are reports.
 - If you see something, say something.
 - If dealers get approached by someone trying to sell bootlegged oysters, get tag numbers, descriptions of vehicles and people
 - Or if people are approached for sales, collect information and details and report it
- Dr. Andy Kane: Is there any data on the amount of poaching that's going on? Estimates or numbers? Estimating the number of oysters removed will also have to be factored into the available number of oysters harvested.
 - SONAR can show the amount of substrate taken if people are dredging
 - Devin: That's a good question to bring up – we don't know of a way to record it. It's hard to estimate how much is being reported versus what is getting through the cracks. But it would be good data to have, particularly when facing funding opportunities
- Oyster Farmer: I came here to farm oysters to take some of the pressures off the wild oysters recovery, but also to provide services.
 - Apalachicola Bay oysters and reefs lasted much longer than many other reefs because of the respect the people held for the oysters, and the tonging.
- Last Comments:
 - Feels like voices aren't being heard – A better job could be done of getting to the community – there are people here who care and can connect with the community
 - We need to hear more solutions from the community
 - We need to go from "me" to "we".