

The Partnership for a Resilient Apalachicola Bay

Meeting #8

Apalachicola National Estuarine Research Reserve

January 29, 2025

12:00 – 3:30 pm EST

Minutes

Facilitator: Betty Webb

Members Present: Otlice Amison (Franklin County Commission), Rickey Banks (Fisherman), David Barber (Seafood Dealer), Cameron Baxley (Apalachicola Riverkeeper), Jim Estes (Retired FWC), Anita Grove (ANERR), Shannon Hartsfield (Oysterman), Gayle Johnson (Indian Lagoon Oyster Company), Ken Jones (Riparian County Stakeholders Coalition), Riger Mathis (RD Seafood), Steve Rash (Seafood Dealer), Jenna Harper (FDEP), Erik Lovestrand (UF IFAS), Kim Miller (ANERR), Devin Resko (FWC), Portia Sapp (FDACS), Joel Trexler (FSUCML)

Others Present: Betsy Mansfield (FSUCML), Anna Cohen (FSUCML), Doug Brown (Citizen), Wayne Williams (Oysterman/SWWA), Cheryl Carr (SWWA), Julie Boussieu (Republican Party of Franklin County)

- 1) *Networking Lunch – 12:00 – 12:45*
- 2) *12:51 pm Call Meeting to Order – called to order by Otlice Amison, President*
 - a. Comments from FWC meeting about oyster fishery; Otlice asks for good discussion without emotions interfering
- 3) *Review Agenda and Opening Remarks (Betty Webb, Facilitator)*
 - a. Board members initially ask questions to FWC then audience asks questions
- 4) *Organization Business*
 - a. *Meeting Notes Approval Decision – December 18, 2024 Meeting*
 - i. Motion: Shannon, Second: Anita
 - ii. All other agree with motion
 - b. *Board of Directors Membership and Approval Decision (one vacancy)*
 - i. Chris Rose suggested and invited to meeting
 - ii. Motion: Shannon, Second: Roger
 - c. *Committees Membership Volunteers*
 - i. Contact Betty to become member of a committee
 - ii. Suggest Anna sit with Outreach & Education committee to help with website updates and social media
 - d. *Other Organization Business*
- 5) *Discussion with FWC Reps on New Developments to Reopen Oyster Harvesting -Devin Resko – Opening Comments*

- There is no fundamental shift in what FWC is doing or expecting from working groups and stakeholders
- FWC gave update to FCC about what they have done and are looking to do
 - o Spoke about fishery, January 1, 2026 is when the current closure ends
 - o Experimental fishery: when fishery reopens, it is monitored with a controlled harvest—used to gather information on how oysters react to the harvest
 - Need to monitor and create models to ensure it is sustainable
 - o Want to responsibly reopen fishery but do not have all questions figured out so stakeholders can be included
- Experimental/re-opening of fishery – talked about for Fall 2026
- Community and Stakeholder Engagement
 - o At least 2 formal workshops in Franklin County and 2 virtual workshops
 - o February, August, & November: FWC Commissioners Meetings
 - November – final rule hearing for Apalachicola Bay oysters
 - No rulemaking in February – all details will be worked out in August
 - Encourage stakeholder engagement in February
 - Senator Simon will be attending February meeting
 - How the bay re-opens has not been decided yet

Partnership Board Members Questions/Comments

- Otlice: Need clarification on FWC’s recommendations; is there going to be an open harvest or an experimental fishery
 - o Devin: An open harvest has minimal to no change in regulations from what was in place before the closure. There does need to be increased management regulations this time. Overlapping between experimental and open fisheries, but significant monitoring of harvest will take place.
- Otlice: Having observers on every boat was mentioned, will this take place?
 - o Devin: This is not preferred by stakeholders and likely will not happen
 - o Otlice: Before going to the county commission about FWC plans, Partnership needs to be up to speed; people feel as if they are not a part of the discussion
- Otlice: Is experimental harvesting a limited entry harvest?
 - o Devin: It could potentially be a limited entry harvest but not decided yet. Must speak with stakeholders.
 - o Otlice: Have we gotten any data from the FWC about monitoring of oysters?
 - o Devin: A lot of the over-arching data being spoken about comes from FWRI data. Will try to schedule someone from FWRI to present at PRAB meeting.
 - Data being used now is from 2023/2024 but collecting data for 2025 now
 - Starting to see recovery in restoration areas, but bay-wide the areas without restoration are not.
- Rickey: If an experimental or open harvest is done, how will the replenishment of the bay be affected? Mentioned quota being met – with snappers this doesn’t work
 - o Devin: Restoration and harvest occurring simultaneously can happen

- Rickey: Work has only been done for a couple of years, and beds could have been replenished at the start of the closure. People may worry another 5-year closure could happen and work will only be done in the final year.
 - Devin: Restoration has been ongoing and are seeing promise in areas from 2021 and 2017. It would be nice to start restoration right away, but the funders are fiscally responsible for results. Must map the Bay and increase monitoring before starting restoration.
- Steve: The number of oysters in the bay controls what goes on in the bay. Need to base all decisions off how many oysters are in the Bay.
 - Devin: Sandra, Andy and FWRI want to see what's out there and then tailor management based on that data.
 - Steve: Effort to survey the Bay needs to be top priority.
 - Devin: FWC has met with FWRI to refocus the monitoring protocols to gather data on what's out there and not just the success of the restoration.
 - Steve: Quoted that 10 oystermen could be supported by the resources in the Bay. This lets down a lot of people and oyster harvesters and cannot be sprung on people.
- Devin: Would the group prefer more full-time or part-time fishers? Twice the amount of people means everyone gets less money.
- Steve: How much money is the state willing to provide for a fishery that supports 10 people?
 - Devin: NFWF is focused on the ecosystem services that oysters provide.
- Gayle: Who is out there counting?
 - Devin: FWRI is doing in the water surveys. The data being used now is from 2024. The February presentation to the FWC Commissioner will be an overview on oysters (biology, services, restoration, etc.) but will include some history of Apalachicola oysters. Don't foresee 2025 data being radically different from past years, so it shouldn't change the current approach too much.
- Shannon: Is concrete going to be considered? Numbers are getting smaller due to illegal harvesting.
 - Devin: There are studies being done with other materials
- Shannon: Will they be looking at Cat Point area which is desirable?
 - Devin: Asked for \$19.5 million for oyster management, \$19.2 will go towards restoration initiatives 92025-26 request, non-recurring)
- Shannon: Oysters come off concrete easier which kills fewer oysters.
 - Devin: This is new information for me and something to be considered. FWRI is prioritizing restoration areas, as there is a lot of funding for these areas. Going to continue to monitor and will account for timing of rock placement.
- Anita: Can you provide the dates you would like the Partnership to attend the FWC Commission's meetings?
 - Devin: Probably August 13-14 and November 5-6
- Anita: Is the FWC allowed to choose who harvests if it becomes an experimental fishery? Would the FWC be able to limit harvest from outside the area?

- Devin: Cannot make a list of people and choose who is allowed to harvest. Can put in qualifications for who can harvest oysters. Qualifications being discussed: FL resident and maybe narrow it down more geographically as well; prior history of significant oyster harvesting before closure; violation history
- Ken: Reiteration of Otlice's comments; There will be a struggle between FWC and Partnership if FWC continues to make unilateral announcements to the public without discussion. This starts to feel like a pattern and undermines the Partnership's strength. Can we set up a technical meeting or committee to meet with FWC more frequently.
 - Devin: Open to the idea.
- Ken: Need to get out of the way of current conversations and say, "should we be talking about this idea?" instead of asking "are you going to be doing this?"
- Ken: If you get a procurement officer to write a technical spec, you've lost. The procurement process should be more transparent to the Partnership and use Partnership's comments as a guide for procurement materials and design. The Partnership should be helping months before the procurement contracts to know where we stand.

- Shannon: Is summertime harvest off the table? Cannot harvest those areas in the winter
 - Otlice: Propose bringing Carrie (or someone else) to present the harvest rules at the next meeting.
 - Shannon: If the areas can't be harvested in the summertime, they should be able to in the winter.
 - Otlice: This becomes multi-agency overlap
 - Portia: Have been pulling samples routinely and have more data but doesn't look much different. With summer months, oysters must get in coolers earlier, time windows are shrinking with increasing temperatures

- Jim: Partnership meets once a month, and many good points brought up, but will there be time to cover everything by August (proposed rule)? Need input on decisions
 - Betty: Technical committee has met 5-6 times and are reviewing data, other committees also meeting then meeting to talk with FWC.
 - Devin: August is when the rule will be proposed, so everything needs to be ready by mid-June. Want to make sure the public aligns with the proposed rule

- Rickey: Do you see lack of an experimental harvest or pilot plan as a fast track to another fishery failure.
 - Devin: Not necessarily a FWC stance but want to make sure reopening is done in a responsible manner. The key is that the plan is adaptive based on data.

- Jenna: When Portia/Carey presents, could she present maps on the aerial extent of current known oyster bars. (That would be FWC.) Need to understand the acreage of the harvest areas and the amount of area/percentage of area that would be affected by one harvest regulation or rule needs to be considered.

- Portia: Could share maps of current harvest areas with monitoring teams to look at overlap of areas that have good populations, and the harvest areas.
- Cameron: Encouraging amping up data analysis up and pushing data out to the community. Difference between perceptions of the population status and what the data says.
 - Devin: Want to be transparent on what they are seeing in the data. Claire (New boss at St. Pete office) wants to look at past data and increase analysis.

6) *15-minute break at 2:01*

7) *Continuation of New Developments to Reopen Oyster Harvesting – 2:18 pm*
Dept/Audience Members Questions/Comments

- Jenna: Clarification about FWRI monitoring – only monitoring restoration reefs, not historic?
 - Devin: There are areas outside of restoration that they look at, but for fishery they choose areas where data is good, which happens to be the restoration areas
- Jenna: If the group recommended something like sampling at a different time of year, would this be considered?
 - Devin: It can be proposed, but FWRI may not think it's feasible. If there's overwhelming support for January 1, 2026, they will be told to make that date by the commissioner.
 - Devin: Wants to know the feasibility of re-opening things by Jan 1, 2026 as there are a lot of things that need to be done to open the fishery back up (law enforcement, FWRI, licensing and permitting, public comment, etc.)
- Sandra: The way FWRI collects data is not efficient enough to support adaptive management. Does FWRI plan on changing their monitoring?
 - Devin: There is an agreement in FWRI to listen and augment monitoring to make it more efficient and able to adapt. Meeting with Sandra and FWRI regularly.
- Wayne: Simple and effective way to get bay back open and monitor data – Oystermen are on the move. Experimental harvest requires a lot of money and material. Trip tickets and tags will tell you how many oysters are being taken from the Bay and save money on monitoring. Lot of different ways to control number of oysters harvested. How are we defining limited licenses or limited entry licenses? Will have to base decisions off a year from now. Doesn't think they'll have a problem with a lot of commercial boats but will gradually pick up as the Bay recovers. If something must be limited, let it be to Franklin County Residents and people who have a history of oystering in this county. We could open Bay on low bag limit and adapt based on the data that comes in. Must keep summer bars open to keep harvest going. Summer bars work as sanctuary for 9 months of the year, so no need for more protected areas. Management plan can't be based on three months surge in one place.

- As work becomes a steadier type of income, more boats will probably come in.
 - Need restoration badly and quickly; keep it simple and use every penny for restoration
 - Can FWC send email updates to SWWA
 - Will lose quality of oysters growing on bigger rocks, grow flat and thin
 - Devin: This is the first I'm hearing of this. Requests SWWA revise management plan they have previously submitted to FWC
- Jenna: Technical committee discussions focused around spatial/temporal opening vs closure. Following restoration, should there be no harvest on a restoration site for a period of time?
 - Ken: If SWWA submitted management plan to FWC, could they share it with Partnership to see if they can find areas of consensus.
 - Wayne: Have previously presented at ABSI but will update plan and send to Devin and Betty
 - Julie: Unelected bureaucracy has had a devastating effect on the economics of small counties. Understands why it's happening but still feels as if project has been devastating on county.
 - Julie: Is FWC speaking to DEP about the drill permit in Calhoun County? Spending a lot of money to restore the Bay, but what happens if there's another oil spill that reverses all the work.
- Jim: How many acres have been restored and are viable for restoration?
 - Jenna: There is a number somewhere, but it's old. Maybe 50 acres.
 - Jim: There were 7,000 acres of hard bottom oysters, now it's maybe only a couple hundred acres. Need to scale down expectations because the amount of acreage will not support an unlimited number of oystermen.
 - Ken: Scale is the most important thing to deal with. Having these conversations at technical committee meetings.
 - Wayne: There's a lot of hard bottom oysters out there, most of the big reefs have a good foundation, we just need materials there. A lot has potential but no material.
 - Sandra: There's less than 200 productive acres in the Bay. There are 280 acres of limerock that FDEP and FWC put out in 2017 and 2021. Only 79 acres has more than 300 bags/acre. Most of the bay does not currently support oysters.
 - Julie: 77 acres was done in 5 years. Proposed to restore 2000 more acres with millions more dollars. Based on previous work, it would take a long time and use a lot of money.

- Devin: Some of the previous projects are getting mixed together. 77 acres was done last year (May-Oct 2024). Going to ask for recurring money as restoration will be ongoing, and current experiments will be blueprint moving forward.
- Anita: Need write down and report on what has been done, what's being done, and standardize reports. Need to communicate to stakeholders/community members to get information out there.
- Betty: Thanks FWC for attending meetings and giving input. Need more communication prior to public meetings by FWC. Confirms Devin will continue attending additional meetings and technical meetings to have further discussions.
- Betty: The time frame is short if the proposal is going to be presented in August, so when does the Partnership need to have management regulations for FWC ready by?
 - Devin: Will give a more accurate timeline after checking. August is proposed rule change; it can shift before November. Early-mid June is when they start drafting. Will provide everyone with updates of times and relevant workshops.
- Ken: At the presentation in August, should it be in the form of a rule or just a presentation?
 - Jim: It will be presented in the form of a rule. The Partnership doesn't have to formulate recommendations into rule format.
- Joel: When FWC produces legislation for more funding, is there a ROI or economic benefit analysis?
 - Jim: Sometimes there's a request for this, but it's usually done qualitatively.

Points to Consider from FWC

1. Preference regarding more full-time or part-time harvesters
 - a. Part-time is based on how much money someone is bringing in
 2. Opinions on summer harvest option/closures
 3. Understanding how many oysters are out there and therefore what percentage should be removed
 - a. AL does 30%, MS does 20%, and some east coast has single digits
 4. Switching terminology from bags to hundred counts
 - a. How much would someone get on the market?
- Ottice: Is it going to be FWC's recommendation to have an experimental harvest, or something different? What was presented at FCC was not in line with what the public views as a harvest.
 - Devin: On-board observers are not feasible. Experimental fishery and open harvest with more management are synonymous.

- Otlice: Has legislative funding been approved for this coming year?
 - o Devin: It has been submitted but not approved.
- Devin: FWC actively recruiting Oyster Biological Scientists for Franklin County and Crystal River. Submission window open until Feb 2, 2025.

Next Meeting: February 19, 2026

8) *Adjourned at time 3:13 pm*