

The Partnership for a Resilient Apalachicola Bay

Meeting #9

Apalachicola National Estuarine Research Reserve

February 19, 2025

12:00 – 3:30 pm EST

Minutes

Facilitator: Betty Webb

Members Present: Anita Grove (ANERR), Shannon Hartsfield (Oysterman), Roger Mathis (RD Seafood), Rickey Banks (Fisherman), Bruce Millender (Millender Seafood), Chris Rose, David Barber (Seafood Dealer), Ottice Amison (Franklin County Commission), Ken Jones, (Riparian County Stakeholders Coalition), Grayson Shepard (Charter Captain), Gayle Johnson (Indian Lagoon Oyster Company), Chad Hansen (PEW Charitable Trusts), Jim Estes (Retired FWC), Steve Rash (Seafood Dealer)

Others Present: Jenna Harper (FDEP), Dan Elinor (FWC), Devin Resko (FWC) Andy Kane (UF), Joel Trexler (FSUCML), Sandra Brooke (FSUCML), Portia Sapp (FDACS), Kim Miller (ANERR), Carrie Jones (FDACS), Anna Cohen (FSUCML), Betsy Mansfield (FSUCML), Charlie Wood (FWC Law Enforcement), Doug Brown (Citizen)

1. *Networking Lunch – 12:00 – 12:45*
2. *12:48 pm Call Meeting to Order – called to order by Ottice Amison, President*
3. *Review Agenda – Betty Webb, Facilitator*
4. *Organization Business*
 - a. *Meeting Notes Approval Decision – January 29, 2025 meeting*
 - Motion: Ken, Second: Shannon, Approved
 - b. *Committees' membership Volunteers?*
 - Committee members still needed, reach out to Betty to participate
 - Education and Outreach: Doug Brown and Anita Grove members; Ottice asked to join
 - o Doug has set up Facebook page "Partnership for a Resilient Apalachicola Bay"; wants everyone to go like it
 - Finance Committee: Shannon, Ken, Joel members
 - Technical & Communication Committee: Let Betty know if interested in joining
 - c. *Other Organization Business*
5. *Anita Grove, ANERR/COA Commissioner*
 - a. *USACE Sustainable River Program Update and Discussion*

- Looked over the work being done within the Apalachicola Bay and potential for collaborating with SRP
- Work with Corps to create problem statement, flesh it out, and get approval; due in August and selected in October
- Met with people and talked about oysters, but SRP manage more for river projects than for the Bay or ocean; more advantageous to choose river project
- Tie to threatened and endangered species
- Generally talking about increasing flows of rivers, not talking about decreasing flows anywhere

Partnership Board members Comments

- Ken: What Corps office would we be working with? *Mobile, AL*
 - o Not ideal because that office is not very interested in problems with this region; would like to look at other Corps offices
- Chad: Clarified point about other projects in the region, not sure if it's competitive and if they would take on multiple projects from same region
 - o Anita: may take a few years to get into, so best to start now
- Ken: Corps has \$3 million to explore dredging and operations for navigation, already funded to do it and wouldn't have to go through SRP, just modify to better fit interests of Partnership
- Motion to have Anita pursue work further, Motion: Bruce, Second: Chad

b. Oyster Harvester Licensing Update and Discussion

- Spoke with city of Apalachicola and the Mayor about ability to issue licenses; voted to no longer issue licenses
- Issue is the education component, partnership could take active role in education
- Apalachicola is getting out, being written out of the statute

Partnership Board members Comments

- Shannon: May be jumping the gun; don't know if they're going to issue licenses again
 - o In the rules of state, said that City of Apalachicola will issue licenses
 - o Portia: language would have to be changed in statute, FDACS does harvest training with FWC which is a requirement for shell fishers statewide
- Ottilie: To get an oyster license and go oystering down the coast, do you have to watch the same video?
 - o Portia: yes, it's a requirement for any shell fisher who is harvesting either for aquaculture or wild harvest
 - o Betty: intent to influence what FWACS is doing and have input

- Ken: there is \$50,000 for the Partnership to do outreach, could some money be pulled from there to develop things
 - Potentially, but things already organized, may just need to review and make recommendations to add or remove things
- Andy: is it possible to view the video from the FWC website?
 - Portia: yes, must create login first to see current version
 - Portia's going to send this year's version of the education materials in April

6. *FDACS Apalachicola Bay Water Quality Sampling – Carrie Jones, Environmental Specialist II, FDACS*

- National Shellfish Sanitation program
 - Established minimum requirements for safe shellfish harvest; protect public health and harvest of shellfish from properly classified waters
 - FDACS completes routine surveys and water sampling in shellfish harvesting areas to meet NSSP and FDA ordinances
 - Sent to lab in Eastpoint
 - Goal of classified shellfish harvesting areas: maximize acreage and protect health of consumers
- Water Sample Collection
 - Pollution Source Survey: identifies all direct and indirect sources of pollution
 - Conducted every 3 years
 - Use Fecal Coliform bacteria as indicator species; if present, good indication other harmful bacteria are present
 - Can process local samples same day
- Water Quality Data Analysis: data entered in database to look for trends
- Closure criteria use rainfall and/or river levels; when criteria exceeded, close area at sunset
- NSSP has 5 classification types that determine harvest restrictions
 - Types based on FC water quality and proximity to pollution sources
 - Approved Areas: safe for harvest always; only closed for emergencies
 - Conditionally Approved: approved on certain conditions; safe for harvest when area is open, closed when environmental variable predicts increase in fecal bacteria in water
 - Restricted Areas: open only when approved on certain very good conditions
 - Prohibited Areas: harvest not allowed due to water quality or pollution source
 - Unclassified Areas: always closed
- NSSP require each area to be sampled at least 5 times per year under Adverse pollution conditions
- Apalachicola Bay due for updated survey to see if updated classification needed

- October-April: North of bridge not suitable levels
- A lot of the bay could be open year-round based on water quality data, including an area that was previously a summer area
- Data not finalized, not in statute yet

Partnership Board members Comments

- Shannon: May is the only time of the year the area around the river could be opened?
 - May through September is promising, likely have higher closure criteria though
- Ottice: Just to clarify, if we as a Partnership want to make a recommendation on a summer closure, 1662 would never be harvested?
 - Yes, just based on water quality, depends on closure time
- Gayle: In Indian Lagoon, closed based on rainfall at the Apalachicola Airport
 - All areas that are conditionally approved based on airport gauge
- Anita: pointing at map—south of that will likely transfer to conditionally approved
 - Winter bars are good year-round
- Betsy: How do the percentages of the classifications compare with other areas in the state?
 - Every area is different based on water discharge, not comparable
- Chad: interesting to look at spawning and larval transport in relation to this
- Andy: Has the data from north and south of the bridge changed over past years?
 - Looked at data from past couple of years and not much change at all
- Steve: about 10-15 years ago, worked with the Department of Health on St. George Island; a lot of beach/swim closure signs. A lot of houses have been built, but the warnings have gone away, how does that work?
 - Carrie: Not gone into all the reports on where pollution sources are coming from

7. Dan Elinor, FWC updates

- New head of oyster research group may be ready to present at next meeting
 - Send questions ahead of time
- Commission Meeting Wednesday February 26, 2025 (starts at 8:30)
 - Dan has given Betty his phone number, let him know if you are coming and he can get you registered
 - Only 3 minutes per person for comments
 - Parking in Woodward Garage, second floor reserved for commission meeting
 - Meeting is televised but cannot call in questions

- Not discussion on recommendations – review and discussion of oysters statewide with Apalachicola component
- Budget release
 - \$10 million NFWF for spending authority
 - \$20 million request – request can fluctuate
 - 99.9% will go towards construction and substrate placement, money from NFWF for monitoring
 - Will have to lock in contract quickly
 - Dan has name/address of Rep and Senator in charge of budget
 - Can write letter in support, ask Betty for information

Partnership Board members Comments

- Rickey: will there be a buyback of licenses; give people the choice to sell their licenses – only for people who made their living on the Bay
 - Limits oystermen on the Bay and fairer than the lottery
 - Current budget requests don't account for this
- Shannon: The next round of planning might be looking at concrete, will this be a decent option? Concrete comes off the bottom easier
- Rickey: Pumping sand from offshore in Mexico Beach and hauling away shell. FWC should be using it somewhere else
 - Sandra: River called her about it, getting information about what material is coming out and if it's suitable
- a. *Address FWC's four questions from the last meeting*
 - i. Betty: all (except part time vs full time) will be answered in next section after break

8. *15 minute break at 1:55 pm*

9. *2:15 pm Committee Updates – Group discussion on Bay Re-Opening Recommendations for FWC*

- a. *Communication Committee – Chair Shannon Hartsfield*
 - Came up with recommendations for FWC, working document and should not be shared outside the Partnership
 - Considerations taken into account
 - Timing of final rule decision (Nov 2025) – cannot be ready to move forward on Jan 1, 2026 as prime oyster harvesting timeframe will have passed
 - Timing of initial restoration work completion
 - Harvestable product availability
 - The number of harvesters will limit itself (other jobs, age out, etc.)

- General Recommendations
 - Support FWC recommendation for a fall experimental harvest
 - Ottice: by labeling it experimental is that more legal flexibility, label that's not general opening would give FWC leeway to get harvesters specifically from Franklin County
 - Dan: Not called experimental harvest anymore, legal indicated so far it's not possible but needs to double check
 - Ottice: If someone enters the lottery from Cedar Key and can't come harvest, they're taking the slot and it's not productive
 - Dan: will have to build qualifying criteria in
 - Anita: supportive of term experimental harvest
 - Gayle: Several approved processors in area, will harvesters be able to go to any processor they want
 - People have to go through same processes to turn in oysters
 - FWRI surveying should include tonging technique
 - FWC staff should experience tonging and processing process – beginning to end
 - Engage and fund local harvesters to work the restored areas before experimental harvest begins – need to be worked to survive
 - Devin: heard from researchers that working the oyster bars is detrimental
 - Makes for more marketable oysters, however for every one marketable oyster, it kills many more
 - Roger: When you knock them apart you get more oysters
 - Monitor during experimental harvesting extensively
 - Monitor on site everyday
 - Open by bar/zone – allow until 20% of produce is harvested
 - Consider hiring non-participants in experimental harvesting program to move around ahead of bars being worked to assist with surveying for next harvestable bar/zone
 - Oystermen can assist in this research
 - Everyone thinks Cat Point will be starting point – there are oysters off these areas, not the historic levels, but better than it was
 - Use standardized grids or zones so that everyone knows what area they are referring to
 - \$30 million set aside a segment of these funds for extensive monitoring and law enforcement, engage non-participants (not chosen to harvest) in experimental harvesting program as noted above and engage harvesters as noted

- Shannon: hard to catch poachers now, will be even harder when it's open
- Dan: don't have recurring money right now and it's a big ask; \$20 million specific for restoration
- Office: need to see what's being spent and where, need itemized list of how it will be used
 - Chad: 2 types of monitoring; law enforcement monitoring different than ecological monitoring of oysters in water
- Recommendations: harvester selection
 - Oyster endorsement: limited number during experimental harvest time adjusting number as allowable
 - Resident of Franklin County
 - FWC should make selection using an interview process
 - Start with control years (2008-2010)
 - Look at legitimate fines/violations – pull them out
 - Update language so it's specific to oysters
 - Look at harvester that may not want to go back
 - Will result in list of good harvesters
 - Language should be changed to qualified harvesters, not good/bad
 - Increase the number of initial harvesters based on determining factor – oyster abundance from continuing and extensive monitoring and surveying
 - Addition of younger future harvesters

Other recommendations:

- FWC needs to work with Partnership and make recommendations a high priority
- FWC must work with Partnership Technical Committee in surveying and monitoring
 - Technical committee must revise language to include something like this
- Chad: use it or lose it clause in there
 - Roger: if you got the license for the experimental, you must use it and make money; must be your job
- Devin: looking into who can be involved in it thoroughly and talking to legal to make sure everything is legal and feasible
 - Geographic restrictions are state of Florida right now
 - Options: more than 50% of landings from Franklin County, must be in Franklin County prior to season to get license

- Need those involved to harvest and provide data
 - Calling it limited reopening of fishery not experimental harvest
- Betty: going to create a document that's more formal and includes technical committee's recommendations, want ABSI report included as well
- Jenna: If we go from bag to count, wouldn't that significantly reduce the amount of effort for enforcement
 - Yes, the committee considered this
- b. *Technical Committee – Chair Chad Hanson*
 - Committee had 5-6 calls; talked about ways to develop and produce mathematically the overall harvestable level then how much should be harvested based on that level
 - Should it be the entire area or certain bars and how does monitoring play into it
 - Monitoring in water for population assessments and making sure there's checkpoints for harvesting monitoring
 - No specific season recommendations but narrowing in on them
 - Monitoring: discussed some portion of money should be dedicated to monitoring (both in water and law enforcement)
 - Not quite at the final recommendations
 - Anita: trying to figure out when recommendations will be finalized
 - Betty: bring back to next meeting for another review and potential approval; can submit initial document and amend as we see fit
 - Chad: personally, we need to set restoration goals and targets to ensure we're driving towards largest expanse of oyster habitat; ensure recurring funds
 - Andy: in short term future, considering \$20 million applied for infrastructure; 5% of that be dedicated to monitoring and enforcement; need to protect that investment
 - Ken: much bigger investment in next year or so as fishery comes back and adapt monitoring program as fishery grows
 - Dan: don't need to worry about that aspect; will find money to run properly; the FWC will find funding and knows there will be a cost for monitoring and law enforcement
- c. *Education and Outreach Committee – Chair Anita Grove*
 - Anita touched on it earlier; will be working with Anna, Doug and Office joining committee
- d. *Finance Committee – Chair Ken Jones (FPC Legislative Request)*
 - Ken: involve Franklin's Promise to get youths involved in oyster harvesting

- Discussion on types of funding and matches and opportunities

10. Other Business: Comments from Board Members and Attendees

- **Next meeting: March 19, 2025**
 - Betty: send out Seafood Worker's and Waterman's Association recommendations for opening the Bay from Wayne Williams
 - Have one person speak for the Partnership at the Commissioner's meeting, but have a lot of people in the audience to support
 - o Office working on 3-minute speech

11. Meeting Adjourned at 3:14 pm