Officials consider nonnative oysters for Chesapeake Bay

By Sara Michael
Examiner Staff Writer

Fast-growing, disease-resistant Asian oysters brought to the Chesapeake Bay could help restore the depleted oyster population — or they could pose grave risks for native oysters, a federal study found.

Introducing nonnative oysters is just one option in a combination of possibilities Maryland and Virginia officials are considering.

"No singular alternative to date has been evaluated which would answer all the problems and needs identified for the Bay," Mark Mansfield, chief of planning and programs for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in the Norfolk District, said during a conference call Tuesday.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Maryland Department of Natural Resources and Virginia Marine Resources Commission released the draft of a highly anticipated report Tuesday detailing the effect of nonnative oysters on the water quality, ecosystem and economics, among other factors.

The report, which outlined eight options, stopped short of making a single recommendation, awaiting feedback from the public. A 60-day comment period begins Friday.

Officials did narrow the focus to three possibilities:

» Expand efforts to restore the native oyster population, including having a temporary harvesting moratorium and cultivating or farming oysters,

» Expand native oyster restoration and introduce triploid (sterile) Suminoe oysters,

» Expand native oyster restoration and introduce triploid and diploid (reproductive) Suminoe oysters.

State and federal officials have been studying this issue for at least five years with the goal of restoring the population to the harvest levels seen between 1920 and 1970.

"The future of oyster restoration and management represents an incredibly complex challenge," said Tom O'Connell, fisheries director at DNR.

Gov. Martin O'Malley said he is still concerned the risks of introducing the non-native oysters could outweigh the benefits.

"As we consider the options, we must first ensure we do no harm," he said in a statement.

Overfishing and poor water quality has led to the dwindling of the Bay's oysters to less than 1 percent of the abundance of the 1800s. More recently, two foreign diseases, known as Dermo and MSX, have wreaked havoc on the native Eastern oyster.

The Suminoe oysters, which are native to the China Sea, have shown to be resistant to these diseases and grow much faster, according to the report.

However, concerns remain about whether this oyster is more susceptible to other diseases or that they may migrate outside of the region, said Brian Rothschild, chairman of the independent advisory panel that reviewed the oyster research.

"The answer here is not a direct answer," he said during the call.

"It's a question of the risks that society sees in the introduction of the oysters."

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AP FILE

The oyster on the left is dead and the one on the right, which Chesapeake Bay Foundation field educator Tiffany Granberg is holding, is about a day away from dying. The dying oyster population in the Bay has spurred Maryland and Virginia officials to consider adding a nonnative oyster to help restore the population.

THE 3-MINUTE INTERVIEW

Larry Simns

Larry Simns, president of the Maryland Watermen's Association, spoke with The Examiner *about the proposal to introduce nonnative Asian oysters into the Chesapeake Bay to help restore the dwindling oyster population.*

What do you think of the proposal? That's going to be a political battle. Virginia already has [nonnative oysters] in the water, but they have the nonreproducing oysters. Maryland doesn't have it. They've experimented with it some in the universities. ...
It's more political than scientific.

So you think it's a good idea? If you don't have oysters that live long enough to reproduce, you won't have oysters in the Bay. The disease gets in them, but it doesn't kill them. So this has to be considered.
It has been studied without any negative effect, so now it's a political battle. The only thing they said in the report is that there might be some unknowns. There are always unknowns in life.

Those unknowns don't concern you? Not at all. I don't know why everyone is worried about an oyster overtaking something we really don't have.
We really have to do something. We didn't want to put something in the water that is harmful, but after five years, no one has found anything wrong.

Should officials continue efforts to restore the native oysters? I definitely think they should restore the oysters that do live in some of the rivers. And they can experiment with the triploid oyster, which doesn't reproduce. I'd experiment with that first. There are not enough hatcheries and not enough money to hatch enough oysters to restock it to the way it used to be. – *Sara Michael*

Scientists warn of risks in nonnative oyster introduction

By Sara Michael
Examiner Staff Writer

The native Chesapeake Bay oyster may still have a fighting chance for survival.

Local scientists contend that before officials turn to a nonnative oyster to rehabilitate the Chesapeake Bay oyster population, they should first invest in attempts to revive the native aquatic animals.

"There are a lot [of scientists] that feel we have a lot of unrealized potential in the native oyster, and we should fulfill those first," said William Goldsborough, senior scientist for the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, a nonprofit dedicated to Bay restoration.

Maryland and Virginia officials are considering introducing nonnative Asian oysters into the Bay, along with continuing native restoration efforts, to boost the dwindling population.

A draft report released by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Maryland Department of the Environment and Virginia Marine Resources Commission details the effect of this proposal.

Introducing a non-native species brings a wealth of risks, scientists said.

The Asian oysters may compete for space with the native oysters, which could spell extinction for the natives, Goldsborough said.

The Asian oysters may be resistant to the diseases ravaging native oysters, but they can fall prey to a different non-native microbe called Bonamia. The non-native oysters also have thin shells, making them more susceptible to predators, he said.

"They would have their own problems," Goldsborough said.

The problems that have lead to the native oysters' demise, such as poor water quality and disease, would remain and still be concerns for other species of oysters, said Mark Bryer, director of the Chesapeake Bay program for the Nature Conservancy, a conservation organization.

"It seems that taking precautionary approach is really important and a wise decision," he said.

The draft report offers a "dose of reality" to proponents who thought the Asian oyster would be the perfect solution, said Don Boesch, president of the University of Maryland Center for Environmental Science.

"When you weigh the modest potential gains and uncertain risks, I don't see there is a groundswell to say we should move ahead with the introduction," he said.

Instead, the report makes a strong case for expanding aquaculture, which is cultivating or farming native oysters for harvest, he said.

The report offers options, Boesch said, "But really it's saying, 'Let's realistically look at what we can do with native oysters.' "

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>
> – **Don Boesch**, president of the University of Maryland Center for Environmental Science

Public comment sought

» A 60-day comment period begins Friday on the draft environmental impact statement for oyster restoration in the Chesapeake Bay.

» The draft report, released by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Maryland Department of the Environment and Virginia Marine Resources Commission, is available online and at several libraries, including the central branch in Baltimore City.

» Six public hearings will be held in Maryland and Virginia, including one from 6 to 9 p.m. Nov. 13 at the Miller Senate Building, 11 Bladen St., Annapolis.

» Residents may mail comments to Department of the Army, Norfolk District, Corps of Engineers, Fort Norfolk, 803 Front St., Norfolk, Va. 23510, Attn.: Mark Mansfield, or e-mail mark.t.mansfield@usace.army.mil.

» A final report will be published in April 2009.