

**House and Senate Legislative Retreat Presentation
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Thank you. The Virginia Seafood Council (VSC) is honored to be part of today's agenda and we appreciate the opportunity to speak about important issues that affect Virginia's seafood industry.

VSC is a trade organization that represents the interests of various seafood industries including the harvest and production of commercial finfish, shellfish and crustaceans. At times, balancing these dynamic interests is challenging however, with collaboration from agencies such as the Virginia Marine Resources Commission, the Virginia Institute of Marine Science (VIMS), the Division of Shellfish Sanitation and Virginia Tech, we generally find solution. Today, we would like to publicly thank these agencies for their continued support and recognition of how important the seafood industry is to the Commonwealth's economy and the preservation of our rich, traditional heritage.

I would like to focus this presentation on a specific collaboration that the Virginia Seafood Council has been intimately involved with for nearly the past ten years—*Crassostrea ariakensis*, the non-native oyster. We all know the sad story behind one of our most treasured natural resources the native oyster, *Crassostrea virginica*, so I will not belabor the point. However, VSC, in collaboration with VIMS, began examining the growth and survival of non-native oysters in 1992 by using sterile *Crassostrea gigas*, the

world's most cultured oyster. We quickly realized that *gigas* was not suitable for all of the Bay's unique environments and subsequently interest in this non-native oyster waned. Most importantly, VSC recognized the potential of experimenting with non-native oysters and in the mid 1990's we requested the General Assembly appropriate money for VIMS to continue examining the potential utility of non-native oysters in Chesapeake Bay—specifically the Aquaculture Genetics and Breeding Center was created, in part, to accomplish this mission.

I hesitate to call *ariakensis* a non-native oyster because it was brought to Virginia in 1996 held in quarantine and propagated through several generations at VIMS according to International quarantine protocols and is more appropriately called an “alternative” oyster species.

During the first research project conducted in 1998 and 1999, VSC quickly recognized the potential positive impacts, both ecologically and economically, this alternative oyster could have in the Bay. Accordingly, VSC obtained state and federal permits in 2000 to begin further investigation of these impacts using only sterile *ariakensis* across a slew of environmental conditions. As we near completion of our eighth year and seventh commercial project we are pleased to still report positive economic and ecological benefits using this oyster. Consistently we have reported fast growth and high survival of this sterile alternative oyster across all tested environments.

As interest has continued, both state and federal partners embarked on an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) over four years ago to determine the risks and benefits associated

with introduction of this alternative oyster in Virginia and Maryland waters. It is with great anticipation that we all look forward to this draft document becoming publicly available on October 17th of this year. As a stakeholder, very much interested in the outcome and future utility of this alternative oyster, we have agreed with others that the best available science must drive future management decisions. Many millions of dollars and many years later, hopefully, we will have that scientifically rigorous, peer-reviewed document to guide us. Three critical public comment sessions will be held in Virginia on November 5th, 7th and 10th.

Which brings me to an interesting point—this EIS not only looks at *ariakensis* options in the Bay but also several other courses of action associated with our native, *virginica* oyster. It is extremely important to recognize that as excited as the industry is about an alternative, complimentary oyster resource in Virginia, we did not, and will not, abandon our native oyster. In fact, over the last several years it has been quite the opposite. Several industry members have invested millions of private dollars in oyster aquaculture using our native oyster which has given us invaluable experience refining oyster aquaculture techniques, not previously practiced on a commercial-scale in Virginia. Critical to this process has been the realization that if culture of *virginica* oysters is profitable, culture of *ariakensis* oysters is twice as profitable. Simply translated, growing local oysters in the Chesapeake Bay destined to be processed in Virginia benefits the Commonwealth's economy. Associated positive benefits include sustaining the remaining Virginia shucking houses, providing jobs for Virginians and reducing fuel consumption in transporting Gulf Coast oysters. Also, not to be forgotten is the number of positive ecological benefits—increased water filtration, return of viable oyster habitat,

and improved water clarity—linked with implementation of an alternative oyster resource in Virginia.

As this Environmental Impact Statement is set to be released, keep in mind the main objective—analysis of the risks and benefits. We will all need to ask ourselves, do the benefits outweigh the risks? Documented, scientifically supported and peer-reviewed benefits need to be evaluated against similarly documented risks. Risk should not be hearsay or opinion, rather fact. This EIS will probably speculate or extrapolate to a certain degree. For example, one may claim that *ariakensis* will reproduce and repopulate inside and outside the Chesapeake Bay however, no scientific evidence confirms that this will happen; only speculation exists.

The economic success of a revitalized and vibrant oyster resource in Virginia lies with the private sector and members of the oyster industry. From construction of private oyster hatcheries to planting oyster shells and seed, we must implement successful techniques to further justify investment, which the industry has begun and continues to conduct. With collaboration and support from research institutions, management agencies and political leaders the Commonwealth can once again enjoy significant oyster production and improve the health of the Chesapeake Bay by responsibly culturing commercial quantities of sterile *ariakensis*.

I thank you for your time and appreciate the opportunity to speak today.