

## The Draft Comprehensive Oyster Management Plan: A Blueprint for Native Oyster Restoration

Over the past century, harvests of the Bay's native oyster, *Crassostrea virginica* or Eastern oyster, have declined from more than 33 million pounds annually in the 1950s to 1.5 million pounds in 2001. The combination of disease, habitat degradation and overharvesting have led to the decline in Chesapeake Bay oyster populations.

In hopes of reversing declining populations of native oysters, Chesapeake Bay Program partners committed to increasing native oyster populations tenfold by 2010. Scientists believe that the achievement of this goal, adopted as part of the *Chesapeake 2000* agreement, will not only help jumpstart oyster recovery, but will also help to improve water quality by increasing the number of oysters filtering the Bay's waters and will provide valuable reef habitat for oysters, fish and other organisms. However, scientists note that this initial goal, although ambitious, is only a first step in restoring Bay oyster populations to sustainable levels.



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### The Draft Comprehensive Oyster Management Plan

As a first step toward reaching the *Chesapeake 2000* oyster restoration goal, Bay Program partners have developed a baywide Draft Comprehensive Oyster Management Plan. Representatives from state agencies, the federal government, academia and the oyster industry throughout the Bay region worked together to develop the draft plan. The Draft Plan will be released in early November for public comment.

The Draft Comprehensive Oyster Management Plan provides both a general framework and specific guidance for implementing a strategic, coordinated, multi-partner effort to rebuild and manage native oyster populations in the Chesapeake Bay. The baywide oyster management plan addresses both habitat restoration and fishery management in one cohesive document. Additionally, the plan emphasizes biologically-based decision making, an adaptive management approach and provides for better coordination among key agencies, organizations and institutions involved in oyster restoration efforts.

The plan focuses on several key strategies for rebuilding native oyster populations:

- managing around disease;
- identifying priority restoration areas;
- establishing oyster sanctuaries;
- managing the fishery;
- increasing hatchery production; and,
- developing a database for tracking oyster restoration projects.

The Comprehensive Oyster Management Plan's overarching goal is to "increase oyster populations to levels that restore important ecological functions including water filtration and nutrient cycling; habitat creation for oysters, finfish, crabs and a diversity of other species; and, maintain an adequate broodstock to sustain regional populations." Two key objectives are identified to reach this goal:

- Achieve a tenfold increase in native oyster biomass by 2010, relative to a 1994 baseline,
- Conserve 10% of the historically productive oyster grounds as permanent sanctuaries.

The Management Plan also identifies several additional objectives:

- Achieve a sustainable commercial oyster fishery through a combination of harvest from public oyster grounds and private aquaculture;
- Reduce the impacts of disease on oyster populations; and,
- Increase hatchery production and develop disease resistant strains of oysters

The plan provides guidance on locating appropriate oyster restoration areas and establishes a standardized approach to implementing restoration projects. Additionally, to better track restoration efforts, share information and evaluate management strategies, an information network will be created to increase knowledge-sharing among the many restoration partners. In an effort to coordinate restoration projects throughout the many Bay jurisdictions, the plan also details specific steps for implementing oyster restoration projects including plan content, review and evaluation.

The Draft Comprehensive Oyster Management Plan is a significant first step in achieving the current *Chesapeake 2000* goal of a tenfold increase in oysters. However, it is important to note that this ambitious goal represents only a fraction of historic levels of oyster abundance and is only the first step toward achieving fully restored oyster populations in the Chesapeake Bay. The challenge is great but the potential benefits, both ecological and economic, are considerable.

### **Public Comment Needed**

The Chesapeake Bay Program is seeking comments on the Draft Comprehensive Oyster Management Plan from all interested parties through a thirty day public comment period beginning November 4, 2002. Comments should be submitted in writing to Mike Fritz, Chesapeake Bay Program Living Resources Coordinator or via the Bay Program website at [www.chesapeakebay.net](http://www.chesapeakebay.net).

*A full copy of the Comprehensive Oyster Management Plan may be obtained by calling 800-YOUR-BAY or visiting the Chesapeake Bay Program website at [www.chesapeakebay.net/cop.htm](http://www.chesapeakebay.net/cop.htm).*