



Chesapeake Bay Program
A Watershed Partnership

THE DRAFT COMPREHENSIVE OYSTER MANAGEMENT PLAN

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Comprehensive Oyster Management Plan (COMP) provides both a general framework and specific guidance for implementing a strategic effort to rebuild and manage native oyster populations in the Chesapeake Bay. The development of the COMP was a multi-partner endeavor by representatives from state and federal agencies, academia, environmental organizations and the oyster industry. Oysters are a vital component of the Chesapeake Bay ecosystem and provide important ecological functions and economic benefits. The main strategies for rebuilding native oyster populations and improving oyster management are: managing around disease; establishing sanctuaries; rebuilding habitat; increasing hatchery production; managing harvest; improving coordination among the oyster partners; and developing a database to track oyster restoration projects. Through these strategies, the COMP addresses one of the major commitments of the Chesapeake 2000 agreement, "By 2010, achieve a tenfold increase in native oysters in the Chesapeake Bay."

Currently, the major limiting factor for the oyster resource is the impact of diseases. Environmental conditions, especially temperature and salinity, affect the distribution and abundance of parasites that cause disease and make it particularly difficult to manage oyster restoration efforts. Recognizing that disease is the dominant factor in all restoration and repletion activities and that disease is correlated with salinity, comprehensive management strategies are defined according to three salinity zones. In addition, there are guidelines for reducing the impacts of disease and actions to enhance management practices such as criteria for moving seed. The disease management actions are utilized in all aspects of restoration activities, sanctuaries, hatchery production, and managing harvest.

A network of oyster sanctuaries that encompass at least 10% of the historically productive oyster grounds will be established throughout the Chesapeake Bay. Sanctuaries will be protected from harvest and, depending on salinity zone, will contribute to an increase in oyster biomass and possibly over time, contribute to the

development of disease resistant broodstocks. Priority areas have been mapped and will be used to focus the multi-partner oyster restoration activities. Habitat will be rehabilitated in these protected areas to enhance oyster production. To support the restoration effort, hatchery production will be increased. Sanctuaries are also one of the main strategies for regulating the fishery. Harvest will also be regulated by a relatively new initiative, special management areas (reserves). These areas will be opened and closed areas on a rotational basis. This strategy is expected to delay harvest till the oysters reach a larger size, thereby, increasing ecological and economic value.

Monitoring results are currently used to guide restoration and repletion activities. With the proposed scope of restoration activities over the next decade, monitoring needs will increase. The oyster partners will form a technical committee to develop guidelines for data management and develop a database for tracking oyster restoration projects. Cooperation among multiple agencies and organizations is essential for implementing the COMP and effectively utilizing limited resources.

Reaching the desired objectives is a multi-generation, long-term effort and there are no guarantees the objectives will be met. Given the current status of disease and present environmental conditions, progress towards increased oyster biomass may not occur in the short-term. The challenge is great, but the potential benefits in both ecological and economic terms are also great. The COMP proposes to guide, focus, and coordinate the multiple partners in rebuilding the native oyster population in Chesapeake Bay.

The Draft Comprehensive Oyster Management Plan will be released for a thirty day public comment period beginning November 4, 2002. For more information or a full copy of the plan, call 800 YOUR-BAY or visit the Chesapeake Bay Program website at www.chesapeakebay.net/cop.htm.