

Virginia Oyster Bottom Restoration through Aquaculture - Cost Share Program

DETAILS & INSTRUCTIONS



USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), is offering funding and resources with the Virginia Marine Resources Commission (VMRC) and Virginia Institute of Marine Science (VIMS) to help oyster growers improve the water quality and habitat shellfish need to thrive in the Chesapeake Bay. Previous funding has focused on restoration projects using spat on shell. While successful, access to the shell resource is challenging for some and participation has been constrained to areas where natural oyster strike is limited. **The goal of the current Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) is to: expand participation by allowing restoration using an alternative substrate to shell; and to expand the geographic area by not requiring spat on shell planting in areas of high natural oyster strike.**

PROGRAM DETAILS/ELIGIBILITY

In order to participate in the Oyster Bottom Restoration Cost Share Program with NRCS, projects first need to meet the requirements of VMRC. Participants/projects will also need to meet additional NRCS eligibility requirements which will be outlined by the local NRCS District Conservationist. Projects/participants meeting both VMRC and NRCS requirements will enter a NRCS ranking pool and projects/participants ranked highest will move into a preapproval stage. The number of preapproved projects depends on the amount of funding available. Ranking criteria are made available on the [Virginia NRCS Aquaculture website](#) and include VMRC checklist information along with NRCS criteria. Preapproved projects will typically start the following year due to the timing of approval versus the optimal timing of shell planting and spat on shell production.

FINANCIAL DETAILS

NRCS financial assistance covers the preparation/restoration of the leased bottom. Depending on the approved plan, the producer either shares in financing the restoration of the bottom or finances the production and deployment of the living overlay of spat on shell, including the cost of larvae and shells for settlement.

NEW OPTIONS FOR FISCAL YEAR 2024

Table 1. Overview of restoration options based on the lease location

Restoration options:	Natural oyster strike at lease area		
	Poor	Moderate	High ¹
Restore or enhance bed - shell base only	No	Maybe	Yes
Restore or enhance bed - stone² base only	No	Maybe	Yes
Restore or enhance bed - shell base and spat on shell	Yes	Yes	No
Restore or enhance bed - stone³ base and spat on shell	Yes	Yes	No

¹ These areas include: the Piankatank River, the Great Wicomico River and tributaries, the James River and tributaries, and the seaside of the Eastern Shore of Virginia.

² Requires Joint Permit and must meet VMRC standards of size, etc.

³ Requires Joint Permit and must meet VMRC standards of size, etc.

What areas are considered high recruitment?

Areas of high natural oyster strike are eligible for bottom restoration without the addition of spat on shell production. These areas include: the Piankatank River, the Great Wicomico River and tributaries, the James River and tributaries, and the seaside of the Eastern Shore of Virginia.

Using stone for private bed restoration requires a JPA

Bottom planting substrate other than natural shell requires a joint local/state/federal environmental permit application, called the Joint Permit Application (JPA), issued by the Habitat Management Division of VMRC. A non-refundable processing fee of \$100 is required for each application. JPAs must be approved prior to submitting the VMRC technical application checklist.

- VMRC habitat permitting: <https://mrc.virginia.gov/regulations/hm-permits.shtm>

Stone substrate must meet VMRC criteria and planting timeframe

Alternative substrates used for bottom planting that are eligible under this program include clean stone which must meet the size criteria, site criteria, and planting timeframe in order to be used.

The size criteria are #57 stone chips or no larger than VDOT #3, which are selected as the size appropriate to enable subsequent harvest. The site criteria which are most likely to receive favorable permit review are water depths between 6 and 16 feet mean low water (MLW). This depth minimizes potential hazards to navigation while maximizing habitat suitability for project success in most locations in Virginia. The substrate planting timeframe if being used in high oyster strike areas (with no spat on shell overlay) is limited to the months of May, June and July to have the best success of attracting natural oyster strike.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR OYSTER PRODUCERS

STEP 1. Develop a plan that includes the lease location and acreage for restoration; the type of substrate needed for bottom restoration and how it will be obtained; and if in low areas of natural strike, how the spat on shell for the restored site will be obtained. If you need assistance with the plan, contact MRC or VIMS.

STEP 2: Complete the VMRC TECHNICAL APPLICATION CHECKLIST and send to Andrew Button at MRC for approval.

STEP 3. MRC will submit approved application checklist to the local NRCS District Conservationist offices.

STEP 4. Contact the local NRCS District Conservationist to begin the application process.

Virginia NRCS Oyster Bottom Restoration Cost Share Program

CONTACTS



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VIRGINIA NRCS AQUACULTURE PROGRAM

District Conservationist	Service Center/Localities Served
Jennifer Templeton 757-302-4441 757-302-4435 jennifer.templeton@usda.gov	Accomac: Accomack and Northampton counties
Trenton Howell 757-389-7606 Trenton.howell@usda.gov	Chesapeake: Cities of Chesapeake, Virginia Beach, Portsmouth, and Norfolk
Scott Hammond 804-210-3243 scott.hammond@usda.gov	Gloucester: Gloucester, Mathews, and Middlesex counties
Michael Combs 804-966-3076 michael.combs@usda.gov	Quinton: Cities of Hampton, Newport News, Poquoson, Williamsburg, and Richmond and Charles City, New Kent, James City, York, and Henrico counties
Jake Browder 757- 279-3286 jake.browder@usda.gov	Smithfield: City of Suffolk and Isle of Wight and Surry counties
Dwight Forrester 804-466-3188 dwight.forrester@va.usda.gov	Tappahannock: Essex, King William, and King and Queen counties
Lucee Kossler 804-333-3525 804-250-4462 lucia.kossler@usda.gov	Warsaw: Richmond, Westmoreland, Northumberland, and Lancaster counties