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## State Report Says No Public Harvest St. Mary's River Oyster Sanctuary Should Be Protected

Last winter, Governor Hogan suspended the restoration activities in Maryland's sanctuaries—turning away a million dollars of federal monies that ended up going to Virginia—because a 5-year study of sanctuaries, public harvest areas, and aquaculture operations was due out last July 2016. That report, written by the Department of Natural Resources with the help of state academic institutions and federal agencies, became public in August as a draft and the Governor's Oyster Advisory Commission is seeking public input on it. Hogan was looking for opportunities to enhance the wild oyster fishery, a campaign promise he made to Maryland's watermen.

The report does little to support Hogan's promise. It states that restoration in two



sanctuaries, Harris Creek and the Little Choptank, has been successful and that restoration activities should continue. Furthermore, the report specifically calls out the St. Mary's River as a sanctuary that is doing extremely well and may, after extensive surveys, be termed fully

restored to Bay goals without the state or federal governments investing a single dollar of taxpayer monies. The report offers just two options within the recommendations for the St.



Mary's River sanctuary: 1) do nothing, hoping the area will meet Bay goals as fully restored in the near future (if not already) and preserve the sanctuary, or 2) invest taxpayer monies in restoration activities to bring the area into Bay goals compliance sooner rather than later.

Maryland expanded its oyster sanctuaries in 2010 from 8% of the Bay's most productive oyster grounds to 24% citing four objectives scientists believed to be essential to the Bay's health and the oyster fishery survival. The first objective was to protect half of the Bay's most productive oyster grounds and investigate why these areas remain productive. Second, in order to combat disease, scientists agree resistance must be bred into the wild oysters—a process that requires large populations of oysters undisturbed by restoration or harvest. It is a long-term strategy that may take many generations of oysters. Third, oyster habitat provides essential ecological functions that cannot be obtained from a harvest bar. While an adult oyster is well-known for filtering up to 50 gallons of water each day cleansing the water column, less known is their ability to support complex microbial communities that provide denitrification—a process of removing nitrogen, one of the Bay's three main pollutants, from the system allowing it to transpire into the atmosphere. Scientists believe this process to be the primary method nitrogen moves out of the Bay ecosystem. Therefore the larger the thriving areas of oysters protected by sanctuary designation, the greater the chance to restore Bay health. Fourth, sanctuaries are needed to provide reproductive capacity generating larvae that can populate public harvest areas. A recent study by Elizabeth W. North et al. (UMDCES) determined that oyster larvae rarely (<4%) settle on the bar they come from. Influenced by the sloshing effects of tides and downstream currents, larvae can travel miles before settling. [*Modeling dispersal of oyster larvae in Chesapeake Bay*, North, Gross, Hood, Li, Zhong, and Schlagg, 2006; Funded by Maryland Department of Natural Resources.]

Annual harvest data for the St. Mary's River show a seven-fold increase between 2009 and 2015, most of that coming in the 2012-15 harvest years. Clearly something is working for the oysters' behalf and the St. Mary's River Watershed Association believes that the industry is benefiting greatly from downriver larval settlement due to the sanctuary designation and prohibition on harvesting oysters upriver in the sanctuary. Association surveys indicate that the population of mature oysters in the sanctuary is growing tremendously and that larval settlement in the sanctuary is well above historic mean levels every year from 2012 on.

The push to open Maryland's oyster sanctuaries to public harvest is ill advised, according to the state's own report. Only for unproductive areas of some sanctuaries does the report recommend a change—to open those areas to public harvest in exchange, acre for acre, for better productive bottom. That's a tradeoff watermen won't like. To read the report, visit: <http://dnr2.maryland.gov/fisheries/Pages/oysters/5-Year-Oyster-Review-Report.aspx>

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**Photo caption:** Underwater image of the oyster reef restoration project in the St. Mary's River oyster sanctuary—a partnership project with St. Mary's College of Maryland, Leonardtown Rotary, and the St. Mary's River Watershed Association.