

Revisiting the Shellfish Program

By Christopher Walsh | January 3, 2019 - 12:57pm

The East Hampton Town Trustees will hold a special informational session on a 10-year review of the Suffolk County Aquaculture Lease Program, which has proven controversial in East Hampton, on Wednesday at 6 p.m. The public has been invited to attend the meeting, which will be held at Town Hall, and offer comment. It will be televised on LTV.

The aquaculture lease program provides access to marine space for private, commercial shellfish aquaculture. The county developed it for publicly owned underwater lands in Peconic Bay and Gardiner's Bay. Participants lease 10-acre plots, for a period of 10 years, for cultivating shellfish.



Oyster boxes in Gardiner's Bay

Photo by Clayton Sachs

Wednesday's meeting is to include a history of shellfish aquaculture in Peconic and Gardiner's Bays; the development of the existing shellfish aquaculture lease program, its administration, and current status; lease program maps and online information available to the public; contemporary aquaculture practices in the bays, and an overview of the lease program review process. East Hampton residents have been encouraged to comment on the program as part of the 10-year review.

The program was established after New York State ceded title to approximately 100,000 acres of bottomlands to the county in 2004 and authorized the implementation of an aquaculture lease program for the region. The program was adopted in 2009, and the 10-year review will assess legal and administrative requirements governing its operation and recommend changes.

A 10-year advisory group was established to obtain public official and stakeholder interest group involvement. John Aldred, representing the trustees, is a member of that group, as is Barley Dunne, the director of the town's shellfish hatchery, who represents the town.

The changing seascape brought about by the appearance of oyster farms offshore irritated members of the Devon Yacht Club in Amagansett and residents who live along Gardiner's Bay. Early last year, an attorney for the yacht club filed a lawsuit in State Supreme Court seeking to bar leaseholders situated near the club from undertaking or continuing any action related to oyster farming at lease sites granted by the Aquaculture Lease Board in July 2017, or engaging in any other activity that would interfere with sailing. The Aquaculture Lease Board, the county's Planning Department and its director, the Amagansett Oyster Co., individual leaseholders, the town, and the State Department of Environmental Conservation, which regulates and issues permits for shellfish cultivation, were all named in the suit.

One of the program's lessees had informed the club that they were going to build out a lease site 1,000 feet from the end of the club's pier. Lease sites approved in 2017 were concentrated and mostly contiguous, rendering a few hundred acres off limits to Devon's more than 300 member families, an attorney for the club said.

The dispute, and shorefront residents' surprise at the changing seascape, prompted Mr. Aldred to call for an informational session to be held in East Hampton, so that stakeholders' opinions and concerns would be addressed throughout the course of the review.

In the meantime, the trustees will resume business with a brief organizational meeting at their Bluff Road, Amagansett, office on Monday at 6:30 p.m. Their next regular meeting will be on Jan. 28.

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