

Oyster Farms a Boon or Eyesore?

Lease program in Gansett called environmental benefit and reeking nuisance

By Christopher Walsh | January 17, 2019 - 3:27pm

An egregious encroachment on waters that have been sailed for generations, or a not-in-my-backyard intransigence that impedes environmental and economic gain for East Hampton residents? Both opinions were aired long and loud at the Jan. 9 informational session on a 10-year review of the Suffolk County Aquaculture Lease Program at Town Hall.



The floating cages used to grow oysters in Gardiner's Bay in Amagansett are an eyesore and a navigational hazard, some people complained at a hearing last week on the Suffolk County Aquaculture Lease Program. Clayton Sachs

Hosted by the town trustees, the event was billed as an opportunity for public comment on the program, under which parcels are leased within a delineated zone for private, commercial shellfish cultivation, and which resulted in a lawsuit by the Devon Yacht Club in Amagansett against multiple parties, including holders of lease sites. That lawsuit was [settled last week](#) (as is reported elsewhere in this issue).

New York State ceded title to approximately 100,000 acres of bottomland to Suffolk County in 2004 and authorized the county to implement an aquaculture lease program. Over a three-and-a-half-year development process, the county delineated a 29,969-acre cultivation zone in which leases would be issued, identifying 859 10-acre lease grids, each with a 10-acre buffer zone, though the program had a 600-acre cap over its first 10 years.

Twenty-two of those lease sites are in town waters. Just two are in use, but 12 leases are pending, said Susan Filipowich, a senior environmental analyst with the county's Planning Department.

At issue, among those complaining about oyster cultivation in Gardiner's Bay at the Jan. 9 meeting, are the gear used to grow them. Rather than situating gear on the bay bottom, oyster farmers use floating cages, kept at the surface by pontoons. These, some at the meeting said, present both an eyesore and a navigational hazard, the latter prompting the yacht club's lawsuit.

Many of those offering comment prefaced their remarks with the assertion that they support aquaculture. Curtis Schade, the Devon Yacht Club's commodore, said that he supported the goals of the program, "but the floating gear makes the surface of our bays unusable for others." Floating oyster cages represent "the taking of a public resource for the benefit of a private individual," he said. The 22 lease sites in East Hampton are "all clustered in one of the most actively used areas of the bay."

Reading a statement from Concerned Citizens of Gardiner's Bay that she said was signed by approximately 78 home owners, Christina Islay said that the group supports a clean and healthy bay and opportunities for fishermen to harvest, but does not support "allowing surface equipment and gear to be placed in locations that are frequented by boaters, sailors, or other recreational users, or destroy scenic views of residents and visitors to our nearby parks."

Cages have broken free of their moorings and floated to the shore, where they are difficult to move, speakers said. The stench of rotting oysters from such cages is another problem, they said.

Peter Mendelman, an owner of Seacoast Enterprises, which operates four marinas in Three Mile Harbor, said he is also in favor of aquaculture, but spoke of nearly hitting a cage's buoy while delivering a boat to Montauk.

"It's a public-use area, and boats go fast though there," he said. "Surface gear is extraordinarily dangerous." He advised that lessees have insurance, given our litigious society. "Please," he said, "put the gear on the bottom. Surface gear is a major conflict."

Patrick Coleman of Amagansett likened the conflict to that at the national level over construction of a wall on the United States-Mexico border. "You've got everyone in favor of border security, but can't come to a satisfactory conclusion. It seems that everyone is in favor of the oyster grower, we just have to figure out how to coexist with that recreational user."

Floating cages "seem to be in conflict" with the goals of the town's Local Waterfront Revitalization Plan, Mr. Coleman said, reading passages from the L.W.R.P. that emphasize preservation of panoramic water views and the prevention of man-made structures. "That floating gear is not aesthetically pleasing, and hundreds of contiguous acres of floating black plastic pontoons covered in bird droppings destroys our scenic vistas."

But Bob Valenti of Multi Aquaculture Systems on Cranberry Hole Road in Amagansett, who holds one of the active leases in town waters, said that there are important reasons for oyster growers to float cages. "One of the reasons you float the cages is not to become an obstruction, but simply because in the spring and summer, the phytoplankton that they eat" is plentiful near the surface. "All these animals do is filter seawater," he said.

Growing oysters on the bay bottom is problematic, he said. “Bad weather flips the cages, the wonderful oysters can’t move, and get suffocated under the sand and die.” His approximately 30 floating cages are almost 1,500 feet offshore, in waters as shallow as four feet, and are submerged in the winter months, he said.

Adam Younes of Promised Land Mariculture Company agreed. Floating cages allow significantly faster growth, protection from predators and parasites, easier access, and reduced labor costs, “not to mention that they look and taste better because they’re not covered in muck,” he said. A strong bottom current topples cages, which become buried by shifting sand, leading to suffocation.

It is neither logical nor reasonable “for industry outsiders to demand I use a certain type of gear,” Mr. Younes said. Floating gear is “an integral part of the modern-day oyster aquaculture operation.” His lease site is 2,000

feet offshore, he said, allowing ample space “for other stakeholders to enjoy the nearshore beach area unimpeded by an oyster farm.”

Remarks from Chuck Westfall, an oyster farmer, caused an outcry. “The entire program is utilizing less than 1 percent of the surface area — a fraction of 1 percent is what is actually being used now. That’s after 10 years. I don’t see how less than 1 percent of the total surface area can create all this navigational hazard we’re talking about. . . . It’s a Nimby issue.

The room erupted in groans and murmurs, prompting East Hampton Town Supervisor Peter Van Scoyoc to demand that they let him speak.

“I didn’t think I’d be popular,” Mr. Westfall quipped.

Stephen Frattini, a veterinarian who works with fish farmers and has a practice in Dutchess County, reminded the audience that this country is the second-largest consumer of seafood yet imports 90 percent of its supply. “The East End of Long Island is on the leading edge of aquaculture in the United States,” he said. “If we’re going to make a national move to decrease our reliance on foreign and imported seafood, it’s going to come from aquaculture.”

Rather than constricting the program, he asked that it be expanded and that “regulatory efficiencies” be built in. “Let’s try to make aquaculture in New York and the United States the best it can be.”

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