

Alabama Shellfish Aquaculture Situation & Outlook Report: Production Year 2019

► Alabama's shellfish aquaculture industry produces oysters through off-bottom farming using an adjustable long-line system and floating cages. The first farm started in 2012, and although jobs have been created, the economic value has been limited. An anonymous survey of Alabama operators revealed the industry's situation and outlook for the 2019 production year.

Introduction

Currently, Alabama's shellfish aquaculture industry produces oysters (*Crassostrea virginica*) through off-bottom farming using an adjustable long-line system and floating cages. An anonymous survey was developed and administered to operators in Alabama to obtain the information in this report. All values are compiled so individual responses are not revealed. In addition, total values are based solely on responses provided and thus are likely underestimated.

The survey was modeled after the shellfish aquaculture survey program conducted by the Virginia Institute of Marine Science and Virginia Sea Grant as well as the Rutgers University New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station and New Jersey Sea Grant.

Highlights for 2019

- There were 21 commercial oyster aquaculture operations in Alabama per Alabama Department of Public Health.
- Farm gate value for Alabama oyster commercial operations was at least \$1,452,000.
- Total number of single market oysters sold in 2019 was at least 2,425,000.
- Oyster market prices realized for respondents ranged from \$0.50 to \$0.70 with a weighted average price of \$0.59, and the mode was \$0.50.
- Operators reported 34 full-time employees and 30 part-time employees.
- At least 74 acres were permitted for oyster aquaculture with at least 40 acres used in production.



Methodology

The 2019 Alabama Shellfish Aquaculture Survey was conducted using the web-based tool Qualtrics supplemented with data from the Alabama Department of Public Health. The survey was anonymous and did not track the IP addresses of the respondents. An introductory email with a link to the survey was sent to all shellfish operators who were certified by the Alabama Department of Public Health. Two follow-up requests were sent to all Alabama farmers to encourage them to complete the survey if they had not done so. For this report, seven surveys were completed and usable.



Summary of Findings

The Alabama Department of Public Health certified 21 oyster aquaculture operations in 2019 versus 22 in 2018.

Hatchery and Nursery Operations

Three respondents reported combined sales of approximately 5.5 million seed compared to 18 million seed reported in 2018, though this appeared to be an artifact of reporting versus actual production, which was observed qualitatively to be up from the prior year.

Oyster Sales and Prices

There was a 26 percent increase in year-over-year reported harvest for 2019 (2.4 million up from 1.9 million oysters in 2018) and a 37 percent increase in farm gate value (\$1.5 million up from \$1.1 million).

Employment

The respondents reported a total of 36 full-time employees and an additional 30 part-time employees. The 30 part-time employees averaged 19 hours per week, which equates to 14.25 full-time employees per year. Employment numbers were relatively unchanged from 2018.

Challenges

In 2019, the Alabama oyster aquaculture industry dealt with natural events that had negative impacts on the profitability and sustainability of the industry.

- Prolonged closures were experienced due to rainfall in some of the growing areas. On average, Alabama waters were not open to harvest a total of 87 days (figure 1). Area II, which includes several large farms, was closed for 43 days.

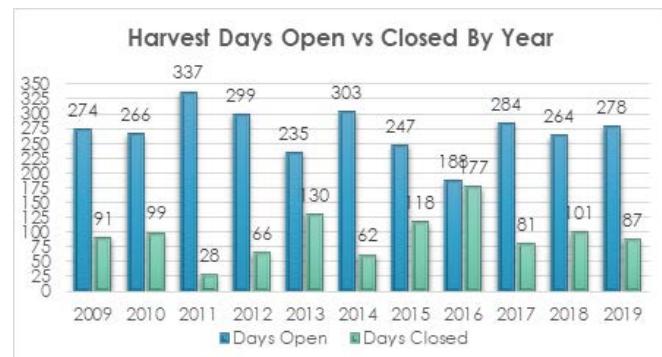


Figure 1. Alabama waters were not open to harvest 87 days, on average.

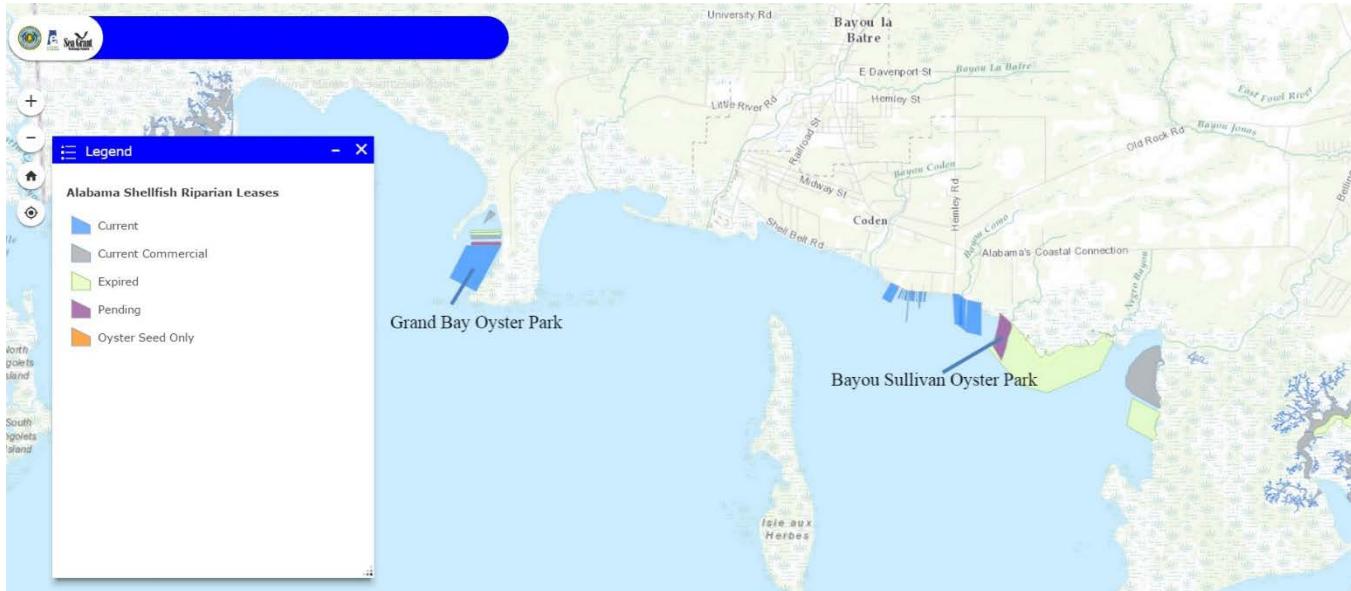


Figure 2. Locations of two new oyster parks in Alabama, 2019.

Opportunities and Outlook

In 2020, Alabama oyster aquaculture likely will grow in the number of operations and permitted acres for farming. Additionally, there is growing interest in commercial aquaculture under existing piers, which has an easier, less costly permitting process. As of July 2020, two new oyster farms have begun operation this year.

The Grand Bay Oyster Park (in Grand Bay on the western side of Point of Pines) has 50 acres for off-bottom oyster farming and is managed by Alma Bryant High School (figure 2).

The Bayou Sullivan Oyster Park (figure 2) has 22 acres available for commercial off-bottom aquaculture with some additional area being used for research by the Auburn University Shellfish Laboratory.



There appears to be a strong regional demand for seed and eyed larvae. In addition to Alabama, growth continues in Florida and Louisiana, and new farms began operation in Mississippi in early 2019. Texas recently passed legislation to allow off-bottom oyster farming.



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This report is based on data generated by the Auburn University Shellfish Lab and the Mississippi-Alabama Sea Grant Consortium.



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