Chesapeake BaySavers

Legislative Issue

Scientists advise against proposed expansion of power dredging for oysters

As the 2013 General Assembly session approaches Sine Die, Maryland legislators appear poised to pass legislation that would expand power dredging for Chesapeake Bay oysters.

Photo courtesy of MD DNR.

Legislation that could enable power dredgers to seek permission from Maryland's Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to operate three days per week - up from the existing two-day limit - passed unanimously in both the Senate and House of Delegates in March. The bills, HB 1505 and SB 1032, have crossed houses and been scheduled for hearings in an effort to pass the legislation before the General Assembly adjourns for the year on Monday night.

Power dredging advocates say it is both an effective harvesting method and a means of improving the health of Chesapeake Bay oyster stocks. Power dredging, they say, unearths oyster shells which have been buried in silt at the bottom of the Chesapeake, enabling them to serve as a growing surface for spat and ultimately supporting greater reproduction of Bay oysters. Power dredging, advocates say, can also remove diseased oysters and disease-causing pathogens from the Bay.

Maryland's Department of Natural Resources (DNR), however, opposes expansion of power dredging on oysters bars. Power dredging, DNR says, can rapidly deplete wild oyster stocks, which are currently estimated at 0.3 percent of historic levels. It can also gradually damage oyster reefs.

"There are a number of publications on power dredging that have been produced in many areas around the world and none of them suggest it is beneficial," said Michael Naylor, Assistant Director of the DNR Fisheries Service Shellfish Program.

Naylor outlined the department's findings and concerns in a letter to legislators earlier this year.

DNR's own research and analysis of scientific studies conducted elsewhere concluded that waterways with low salinity and consistently high oyster reproduction could sustain a limited amount of power dredging.

However, DNR's analysis also "concluded that areas with sporadic recruitment that were power dredged experienced rapid declines in oyster densities and eventual abandonment of harvesting," Naylor wrote.

Oyster landings from a power dredge site at Swan Point support the conclusion that "power dredging in low recruitment areas is unsustainable," he wrote. "Harvests dropped from 1,750 bushels in 2010-11 to 295 in 2011-12. At this point in time, no landings have been reported for the current season."

Furthermore, "since power dredging began, not a single spat has been found on the power dredge site despite very good reproduction in most of the Bay. In other words, there are almost no recruits to replace the oysters that have been so efficiently removed by power dredging."

DNR scientists are conducting a five-year study, which began in 2010, to determine the impact of power dredging on different areas of the Bay.

Naylor concluded, "Because of the very low oyster population of the Bay ... and the consequential low recruitment together with the very high efficiency of power dredging, we do not support expanding power dredging until an evaluation of the ongoing power dredging study has been completed."