

Oyster Growers' Sustainability in Doubt
State of the Union for Oysters

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SOUTH BEND, WA: Twin Harbor oyster growers are facing an “economic time bomb,” according to researchers who just completed a comprehensive study on oyster industry sustainability in Grays Harbor and Pacific counties.

Growers must create new marketing strategies and develop ways to deal with burrowing shrimp by the 2012 statewide deadline to stop spraying carbaryl, a pesticide used to kill shrimp and protect oysters, researchers told farmers gathered at a series of meetings Thursday.

“It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to realize if we can’t control shrimp after that deadline, substantially, you’d lose the heart of the industry,” said Richard Wilson, who’s been growing oysters on Willapa Harbor for more than 30 years.



The study was conducted by independent researchers who interviewed more than 60 stakeholders and participants in the oyster industry. It was funded by the United States Department of Agriculture Cooperative State Research, Education & Extension Service and affiliated with Washington State University’s Long Beach Research & Extension Unit.

It was “a little bit of an attempt at the ‘State of the Union’ for this industry in this part of the country,” said researcher **David Lakey**, founder of the Portland-based The Lake Group. The study detailed “everything oyster” from the threat of degrading water quality in the Willapa and Grays Harbor watersheds to the “very, very little” progress that’s been made in marketing oysters in new ways, like in TV dinners or in ready-to-eat containers.

“We’re talking about getting beyond the packages we’ve been using for 50-plus years,” said Ocean Park-based researcher **Kelly Rupp**, as he held a stand-up bag of ready to stir fry shrimp. “We’re just scratching the surface here. To the extent that we have an oyster sauce coming out, that’s about as high up on the value-added chain as we’ve got.”

Oyster growers need to learn more about their Hispanic and Asian customers, and try to develop products that suit their tastes, Rupp told the handful of people who attended a study-debriefing in South Bend, Thursday afternoon.

After listening to Rupp and Lakey promote "value-added" products, Wilson, the founder of Bay Center Mericulture said, "We have no money. It's nice to sit here and say 'develop marketing.' We have trouble getting our labels. It's really hard to get enthusiastic about bright colored packages," when the future of the bay and the industry is uncertain. Wilson said he fears that if growers can't find an effective way to deal with burrowing shrimp, which turn the hard mud flat oysters thrive in into muck they sink into, the shrimp may take over the bay; eliminating biodiversity.

"So, yes, I'm going to stay here and fight for it, but I don't have a lot of hope for it," he said. Lakey and Rupp, managing director of Lead To Results LLC, suggested growers apply for more grants to study oysters and initiate projects like developing taste and preference profiles of oyster eaters, increasing efforts to distinguish Northwest oysters from those of Gulf and Eastern states and finding alternatives to carbaryl.

"This is a huge effort that we believe is insufficiently funded," Rupp said. "From a business standpoint, we don't see how you're going to get from point A to point B in time for the (carbaryl) phase out." In order to improve oysters' prospects in the coming years, Rupp and Lakey recommended that growers start cooperating more on product and market development.

"The first thing we have to do as an industry is work together and I don't see that ever happening," Wilson said. "We're too damn stubborn to band together."

Nonetheless, the massive study has the potential to give legitimacy and support to growers' concern and possibly draw more dollars and political support to their causes, said Bill Taylor, who shares leadership in Shelton-based Taylor Shellfish. "We really can use this with our legislators and congressional folks," he said. "That is where I really see this being critical. "The good thing about this study is it's going to help get us into the door."

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