Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services

Division of Aquaculture

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Division of Aquaculture

The core responsibilities of the Division of Aquaculture are described in Chapter 597, Florida Aquaculture Policy Act, Florida Statutes, and include:

- Developing and enforcing environmental and food safety regulations governing commercial aquaculture production and shellfish (clams, oysters and mussels) harvesting and processing, respectively.
- Certifying and inspecting shellfish processing plants and classifying and monitoring shellfish harvest areas in accordance with National Shellfish Sanitation Program.
- Leasing coastal state submerged land for aquacultural purposes.
- Certifying and inspecting upland commercial aquaculture facilities for compliance with the Aquaculture Best Management Practices Rule.
- Providing practical and technical assistance concerning regulations, production, financial assistance, or educational programs.

For the open or closed status of Shellfish Harvesting Areas, call:

Apalachicola Shellfish Center	(850) 653-8317
Cedar Key Office	(352) 543-5181
Melbourne Office	(321) 984-4890
Panama City Office	(850) 236-2200
Port Charlotte Office	(941) 613-0954
Tallahassee Office	(850) 617-7600

For Aquaculture Certificate of Registration, Aquaculture Best Management Practices, call:

Bartow Office	(863) 578-1870
Tallahassee Office	(850) 617-7600

For the leasing of submerged state lands and shellfish processing certification information, call:

Tallahassee Office	(850) 617-7600

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Contact the Division at:

Aquaculture_Web@FDACS.gov

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Florida Aquaculture

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Hurricanes Helene and Milton Emergency Relief Funding

There are several opportunities for emergency relief funding following Hurricanes Helene and Milton. These include the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Noninsured Crop Disaster Assistance Program (NAP), Emergency Assistance for Livestock, Honey Bees, and Farm-raised Fish (ELAP) and Emergency Conservation Program (ECP). For more information about USDA programs, contact your local service center.
https.://offices.sc.egov.usda.gov/locator/app?service=page/CountyMap&state=FL&stateName=Florida&stateCode=12

Additionally, Commissioner Simpson has launched the Agriculture and Aquaculture Producers Natural Disaster Recovery Loan Program in response to Hurricanes Helene and Milton. Producers are able to apply for interest-free loans up to $500,000 to restore, repair or replace essential physical property or to remove vegetative debris. To learn more about and apply for this program, visit the following webpage: www.FDACS.gov/Agriculture-Industry/Agriculture-and-Aquaculture-Producers-Natural-Disaster-Recovery-Loan-Program

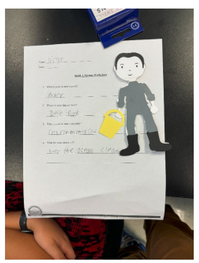
Education Updates

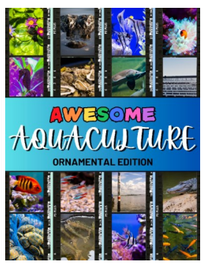
Division staff contributed to the Young Engineers Tallahassee (YET) summer camp again this year from June 10th through July 17th. Staff visited two days per week to teach 4th and 5th grade students about aquaculture in Florida and around the globe. Lessons included a variety of topics including introduction to aquaculture and aquaponics, types of technology in agriculture and aquaculture, recognizing ecosystem engineers and proper techniques for establishing and maintaining an aquaculture system, incorporating several of YET's 10-gallon aquaria.

Twenty-two educators participated in the 2024 Aquaculture in the Classroom training workshop. The workshop was held June 19th through 21st in Fort Pierce through a collaboration between the Division, UF/IFAS and the Florida Aquaculture Association. The workshop provided participants with the necessary knowledge and resources to establish an aquaponic system in their classroom.

After the workshop, 5 schools across Florida were awarded either a 345-gallon or 150-gallon aquaponic system and several schools were awarded aquarium systems or supplementary materials for their existing systems. Currently, Division and UF/IFAS Tropical Aquaculture Lab staff have completed the construction of four out of five awarded aquaponics systems. At these guided builds, students assist with drilling, cutting and assembly, many of whom are doing so for the first time! Due to the hurricane season, system builds are projected to be completed by the end of November.

The Division has also produced several new educational and outreach products. These include an aquaculture coloring book, bumper stickers, updated aquaculture industry poster as well as a resource for donating aquaculture products to local food banks or food pantries. To receive any of these resources, please email Aquaculture_Education@FDACS.gov.





Restoration Aquaculture—Farming Ecological Services

The following article was written by Damon Moore of Oyster River Ecology. Damon was recently awarded the 2024 Dr. Nancy Foster Habitat Conservation Award for his work with restoration and the community.

People have been growing shellfish through aquaculture practices for over 2,000 years. While the primary goal of shellfish aquaculture in Florida has always been for food production, this practice also provides the added benefits of water filtration and improved habitat values while these delectable shellfish grow to a marketable size. Rule changes have paved the way for restoration aquaculture; defined as: the controlled propagation and subsequent planting and husbandry of native, aquatic plants and animals on sovereignty submerged lands, not affixed to public or private dock or pier, for wild population enhancement". In a lot of words, this means using aquaculture practices to grow organisms for their ecosystem service value as the primary goal, aka restoration.

My name is Damon Moore and I am the founder and Executive Director of an environmental nonprofit organization, Oyster River Ecology. Our primary focus is habitat restoration, and especially restoring the once-vast oyster resources of the Manatee River. I have worked through the permitting process on dozens of large-scale ecological restoration projects over my career and I know it is important to acknowledge when regulatory agencies get something right. Oyster River Ecology is a party to the state's first restoration aquaculture management agreement to grow oysters through Florida's new restoration aquaculture rules. Following the methods established and employed by traditional aquaculture practitioners, we are growing oysters on a 10-acre area that is non-harvestable waters of the Manatee River. This is the beginning stages of an effort to restore 100 acres of subtidal oyster reefs that were physically removed by shell dredging operations nearly 100 years ago. We accomplish oyster restoration through grassroots efforts with an emphasis on educating the public about ecological values of shellfish and the benefits of aquaculture practices.

We began operations on our management agreement in April of 2024 and our oysters are growing briskly while helping clean the water and providing habitat support for a multitude of marine species. We have engaged hundreds of students in the process, introducing them to the importance of clean and healthy waterways and how aquaculture practices, both for food and for restoration, provide fresh local seafood *and* improve the waterways that support local fisheries, wildlife, tourism and Florida's economy. Rule changes made by the State to allow for restoration aquaculture have truly streamlined an important regulatory process without compromising necessary environmental protections. From a restoration professional who has worked through the seemingly endless red tape to get permits for restoration projects in the past, this was a breath of fresh air. Kudos to all those involved in making this happen—it is bringing in-the-water results and raising awareness about the value, importance and wide-ranging benefits of aquaculture and Florida's local seafood industry.

-Damon Moore, Oyster River Ecology

Aquaculture Review Council Summary

The Aquaculture Review Council held its third quarterly meeting of the year on August 13th at the University of Florida/IFAS, Tropical Aquaculture Lab in Ruskin. The Council heard final presentations from Principle Investigators of the fiscal year 2023-2024 projects and reviewed the results of the Florida Aquaculture Plan survey. They also made revisions to the Research and Development Priorities which list the possible topics for future project proposals.

The next ARC meeting will be held on November 12th at 9:00 AM EST at the FDACS office in Bartow (170 Century Boulevard, Bartow) to hear additional final closeout presentations for 2023-2024 projects, make final revisions to the Florida Aquaculture Plan and Research and Development Priorities and finalize the fiscal year 2025-2026 Call for Statements of Interest.

For more information, contact ARC@FDACS.gov.

Inspector's Corner: Shellfish Wet Storage

The National Shellfish Sanitation Program (NSSP) defines wet storage as the storage, by a dealer, of shellfish from an approved and open harvest area in tanks containing natural or synthetic seawater at any permitted land-based facility. All certified shellfish dealers must have the capacity to safely store commercial shellfish in an appropriate cooling apparatus at 45 °F or below. A wet storage certified shellfish dealer must have this capability, but they can also submerge their shellfish in water tanks for a pre-determined amount of time as a value added process.

There are a variety of reasons that a shellfish dealer may want to add wet storage to their facility. Molluscan shellfish will filter feed when submerged. A wet storage processor can submerge shellfish in water of known quality and allow them to feed for a set time. This can extend the life expectancy of the product after harvest, it can also allow the shellfish to purge (de-sand) their digestive tracts and thus create a product with less grit. Some processors are also interested in wet storage to exercise control over the flavor of raw shellfish, by manipulating the salinity of artificial seawater.

While the process of wet storage in tanks before final harvest is simple, the wet storage system itself must include a variety of safeguards to ensure that the water the shellfish are filtering is safe. Any certified shellfish dealer wishing to add wet storage to their processing facility will need to complete the approval process with the FDACS Division of Aquaculture. The first step is to provide a detailed plan for the process, including the water source, tank set up, filtration and treatment system, and description of what species will be wet stored and the duration. FDACS will work with the facility to make sure the plan is adequate before construction and/or certification. For recirculating systems, there are requirements for the water purification steps. A facility will need to run their wet storage system at capacity for one week. During that week, they will need to complete 4 sampling events daily with 3 samples per event. They will also need to collect a daily sample of the source water. This totals 13 samples per day, and 65 samples over the course of the week. All of these samples must be sent to a certified shellfish laboratory, which in Florida is the Apalachicola Shellfish Center. All samples must pass water sampling standards to ensure there are no biological or physical contamination in the system.

After successful completion of the validation testing, the acquisition of appropriate wet storage tags and an appropriate HACCP plan for the process, a facility can begin wet storage. Any facility actively wet storing product will need to continue submitting a water sample from the system to the Apalachicola Shellfish Center each week that the system is in operation and FDACS inspectors will perform quarterly inspections of the facility. If any shellfish processors wish to discuss the possibility of wet storage at their facility they should reach out to their inspector.

Division Staff Changes

George Smith

George joined the Division of Aquaculture at the Apalachicola Shellfish Center in April 2024 as an Environmental Specialist II in the Shellfish Harvesting Area Classification Program. He earned a degree in Marine Biology from the University of Alabama. His employment history includes 14 years working for FDACS, FDEP and the Department of Community Affairs. Most of his career was spent in environmental cleanup and restoration. He can be reached at (850) 766-1722 or by email at George.Smith@FDACS.gov.

Corine Waters

Corine joined the Division in March 2024 as an Environmental Specialist II in the Bartow Office for the Aquaculture Certificate and Best Management Practices Program. She is an avid diver and aquarium hobbyist and previously taught in Polk County. She received a Bachelor's degree in Agricultural Education and Communications from the University of Florida. Corine can be reached at (850) 756-2220 or by email at Corine.Waters@FDACS.gov.

Meredith Maher

Meredith joined the Division in May 2024 as an Environmental Specialist II in the Processing Plant and Compliance Inspection Program. Prior to joining the team, she worked at the Department of Ecology with the State of Washington as a Shoreline Compliance and Enforcement Specialist. Before that, she worked at the Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy with the State of Michigan as an Environmental Project Manager. Meredith earned her Bachelor's degree in Environmental Science and Sustainability with a Minor in GIS at Michigan State University. She can be reached at (321) 246-8161 or Meredith.Maher@FDACS.gov.