

**Draft Minutes**  
**Virginia Aquaculture Advisory Board**  
**November 14, 2025**

The Virginia Aquaculture Advisory Board (AAB) met on Friday, November 14, 2025, at the Virginia Aquaculture Conference at the Newport News Marriot at City Center in Newport News, VA.

Members Present: Michael Schwarz (VT), Ann Gallivan (JC Walker Brothers), Ty Walker (Smoke In Chimneys), Martin Gardner (Blue Ridge Aquaculture), Doug McMinn (Chesapeake Bay Oyster Company)

Guests: Danielle Bappert (VFBB), Jake Tabor (VFBB), Brendan Delbos (DWR), Karen Hudson (VIMS), Josh Dusci (VSU), Jonathan van Senten (VT), Mike Hutt (Marine Products Board)

Staff Present: Commissioner Joe Guthrie, Melissa Ball, Ursula Deitch, Joy Harris

Chairman Schwarz called the meeting to order at 11:05am. Chairman Schwarz reviewed the contents of the supplied packet. The new Aquaculture Advisory Board Handbook was included in the packet for board members to review. Introductions were made around the table with everyone stating their interest in the aquaculture industry.

The meeting minutes from November 4, 2024, were presented and approved on a motion made by Dough McMinn of Chesapeake Bay Oyster Company and seconded by Ann Gallivan of JC Walker Brothers.

Chairman Schwarz reviewed the virtual meeting policy with the board and asked for questions/comments. Ann Gallivan of JC Walker Brothers made a motion to accept the policy as presented. Dough McMinn of Chesapeake Bay Oyster Company seconded the motion.

Agency Updates - Chairman Schwarz asked for agency updates. Commissioner Guthrie spoke on behalf of the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (VDACS). He thanked Mike Hutt, Executive Director of the Virginia Marine Products Board, for his 24 years of service and stated that Mr. Hutt will be retiring on December 1, 2025. His position will be advertised/posted in January 2026 to avoid interfering with the holidays. Prior to the hiring of a new Executive Director, the Virginia Marine Products Board office will be relocated to the VMRC office at Fort Monroe. Owen Hynson will take over all Virginia Marine Products Board responsibilities prior to the hiring of the next executive director. Ann Gallivan of JC Walker Brothers and Chairman Michael Schwarz thanked Mr. Hutt for his years of service.

Danielle Bappert of Virginia Farm Bureau spoke on behalf of Tony Banks. She stated that field service agent, Kyle Sturgis, will be leaving Virginia Farm Bureau to return to farming full time at the end of December 2025. Additionally, long time senior employee Wilmer Stoneman retired on November 7, 2025. She added that the Value-Added Producer Grant (VAPG) through USDA would be a good opportunity for aquaculture producers to enhance packing and processing facilities. This program provides grants to help farmers process or market their products. The 2026 application date will open at the beginning of 2026. If you know anyone interested in this grant, please encourage them to apply.

Brendan Delbos of the Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources (DWR) updated the board stating that DWR has nine fish hatcheries throughout the state of Virginia that focus on production and stocking of popular sportfish species including trout, striped bass, walleye, smallmouth bass etc. Their hatchery budget of \$4 million produces return revenue for the state of approximately \$1 billion. Damage to three of their facilities by Hurricane Helene in September 2024 has now been fixed. Challenges the hatcheries have faced in the past year include variable precipitation, cost of operation, labor, and infrastructure.

Mike Hutt, of the Virginia Marine Products Board, stated that he has been working for the past 15 years trying to get the ban lifted to allow Virginia shellfish to be exported to the European Union (EU). Massachusetts and Washington are the only states allowed to sell oysters to the EU at this point. He has attended multiple international trade shows to promote the Virginia shellfish industry. Currently, Asia supplies shellfish to the EU and they want a superior product which Virginia can supply. He also spoke about the impact of the blue catfish on shellfish grown in the James River.

At 11:26am, Chairman Schwarz announced that lunch was ready and that we were having a working lunch. He thanked Virginia Farm Bureau for providing the lunch. The meeting was reconvened at 11:42am.

#### Institution Updates –

VT Seafood AREC – Dr. Michael Schwarz has recently transitioned to Associate Director of the VT Seafood AREC and Dr. Jonathan van Senten has taken over the Director role. This transition has occurred to minimize impacts to administration when Dr. Schwarz retires. Dr. van Senten stated that the Seafood AREC is currently fully staffed with faculty members. Dr. Mengyi Dong, was recently hired as a specialist in micro analytical techniques. She will also be working to establish a genetic database of Virginia seafood and rapid detection techniques for diseases affecting aquaculture. They have two additional hires – Grace Duregger, Communications Associate and Tiffany Wood Mahler, K-12 Outreach. Both are excelling at their positions with Mrs. Wood-Mahler having reached 8,000 contacts in schools within her short time at the AREC. Dr. van Senten stated he has applied for a \$262 million grant from NOAA to support development of coastal and offshore aquaculture. The grant has 26 partners across the country, along with the VT Seafood AREC.

VIMS - In Karen Hudson's absence, Dr. van Senten shared that the updated VIMS Virginia shellfish outlook report is out; and a new round of surveys will be starting soon. All aquaculture producers are encouraged to participate in the survey.

VSU - Chris Mullins from VSU was in attendance to give an update from VSU. He stated that 2025 was a year of volatility within their College of Agriculture. Since January 2025, the College of Agriculture has had two deans depart for positions at other universities. Dr. Jewel Bronaugh is now the interim College of Agriculture Dean & Director of Land Grant Programs. The aquaculture program at VSU has large support. Mr. Mullins introduced recently hired Josh Dusci, as the new aquaponic lead/ indoor agriculture extension associate at VSU. VSU featured the blue catfish awareness at their booth at the 2025 Virginia State Fair. They handed out samples of blue catfish to fairgoers to encourage them to purchase the fish on local restaurant menus. Mr. Mullins thanked VT, VDACS, and the Virginia Marine Products Board for their help with the blue catfish

demonstration. This discussion invoked the suggestion that the Shellfish Growers of Virginia should have a booth at the Virginia State Fair to promote the industry.

Economic Update – Dr. Jonathan van Senten of the VT Seafood AREC stated that the new Economic Contributions of the Virginia Seafood Industry in 2023 has been released. The seafood industry in Virginia has a \$1.27 billion economic impact and creates 6,507 jobs in the Commonwealth. Virginia seafood also supports 3,689 jobs at restaurants and retail operations in Virginia. The seafood industry as a whole generates \$164.4 million in taxes and \$238.3 million in labor income.

Shellfish Growers of Virginia Update – Ms. Jordan Krevonick the Executive Director of the Shellfish Growers of Virginia stated that Virginia is the number one producing state of hard clams and eastern oysters. She also informed the board that on January 14, 2026, a legislative reception is being planned in Richmond to educate the legislators on the aquaculture industry and their needs.

### New Business

VA Blue Catfish Update – Dr. Michael Schwarz and Mr. Mike Hutt spoke on behalf of the State Blue Catfish Working Group. Blue catfish were released by the US Fish and Wildlife Service in the 1970's-1980's to create a new recreational trophy fishery. This was a response to the declining population of striped bass and the desire for a sport fish that could tolerate the conditions of the rivers. Since then, the blue catfish has become an invasive species. There are approximately 700 million – 1 billion pounds of blue catfish in the Virginia rivers and Chesapeake Bay. Blue catfish prefer fresh water, but the larger fish can travel into saltwater. They are scavengers and wreak havoc on blue crabs, clams, oysters, and smaller fish. Blue catfish can eat 8% of their body weight per day and with the population numbers could eat 57 million lbs of seafood out of the Chesapeake Bay every day. Currently, there are four processors in Virginia. Each processor can process 10,000 – 20,000 lbs of fish per day. Unfortunately, in the warmer, summer months the blue catfish are not as active eating and only 3,000 – 5,000 lbs are processed daily. Industry leaders are in negotiations with Sysco to supply blue catfish to retailers and restaurants. Sysco wants a consistent supply 365 days a year to compete with farm raised fish. Currently there is no limit, no quota, and no season on the blue catfish fishery because they prey on so many species.

Commissioner Guthrie noted that the FDA and USDA inspection process is rigorous and costly. He stated that he has had conversations with both agencies to loosen regulations so that more processors can open. He also would like to see more cooperation with Maryland as a bay wide initiative to support the industry.

Doug McMinn, of Chesapeake Bay Oyster Company, said more processors are needed, especially closer to the Northern Neck and Middlesex area. Ann Gallivan of JC Walker Brothers in Willis Warf VA asked if many aquaculture companies are voicing concerns due to impacts from the blue catfish. She stated that she knew what sting ray and blue crab damage on oysters and clams looked like but did not know what blue catfish damage looked like. Dr. van Senten acknowledged that damage impacts would be a beneficial study for aquaculture producers. Mike Hutt with the Virginia Marine Products Board informed the group that most of the damage is currently seen on wild beds but warned if they are decimated the blue catfish will target commercial beds.

Emerging Issue – Biosolids – Mike Hutt of the Virginia Marine Products Board and Shellfish Growers of Virginia Executive Director Jordan Krevonick spoke on the topic of biosolid (industrial residuals) use. Their groups are keeping an eye on possible effects to the shellfish industry. It was suggested that a reduction in the number of acres that industrial residuals can be applied to on the Eastern Shore and Northern Neck would be beneficial for the shellfish industry. Currently, DEQ is reviewing applications for thousands of acres which could cause runoff of Nitrogen and Phosphorous that would be deadly to shellfish and cause algae blooms.

Industry Updates –

Martin Gardner of Blue Ridge Aquaculture said they have been consistent over the past year; however they are considering raising prices due to inflation. Inflation has also been the reason they haven't raised prices because they do not want consumers not to purchase fish due to cost.

Doug McMinn of Chesapeake Bay Oyster Company asked that industry updates be moved to the beginning of the meeting to provide more time for discussion. He noted that access to the water is becoming an issue with wealthy people buying up the shoreline. Middlesex county only has 1 boat landing for aquaculture producers to utilize. The EDA in Middlesex just purchased 21 acres on the waterfront to create better access, however the state needs to make it more of a priority to provide access points for the industry. Mr. McMinn said the market has been struggling since COVID and now with inflation he feels like the overall market for shellfish shrank. The industry has provided a lot of benefit for the state of Virginia and our local communities such as creating SAV, cleaning the water, and a \$1.27 billion economic impact. He would like to see some time of tax credit, incentive or subsidy given to aquaculture producers.

Ty Walker of Smoke In Chimneys is focusing on major metropolitan areas for sales like NYC, Chicago, and Washington DC. Their fish is on the menu of the 4<sup>th</sup> best restaurant in the 50 best restaurants in the USA list. This restaurant is The Smith in Chicago, IL.

Ann Gallivan of JC Walker Brothers stated that this economy is difficult for clam and oyster growers, and the industry is stagnant. Clam prices and sales are struggling especially for smaller growers with not established markets. Some shellfish companies are dropping prices to move product to the detriment of the industry. Restaurants are charging large prices for clams and oysters, and the growers are getting pennies on the dollar.

Next Meeting – Ann Gallivan stated she would like to visit VSU's aquaponics operation in May/June. Chris Mullins said that VSU would be willing to host at the Randolph Farm facility free of charge. A survey will be sent out to decide a date. Second meeting will be held in November 2026.

Public Comment – no comment was provided

Martin Gardner of Blue Ridge Aquaculture made a motion to adjourn the meeting at 1:18pm and was seconded by Doug McMinn of Chesapeake Bay Oyster Company.

Respectfully submitted,

\_\_\_\_\_, Chairman

Dr. Michael Schwarz

\_\_\_\_\_, Secretary

Ursula Deitch