



# Carteret County Shellfish Lease Hearing Meeting Minutes

Tuesday, March 31, 2026

Division of Marine Fisheries Central District Office  
5285 Hwy 70 W, Morehead City, NC 28557  
In Person and virtually via Webex

## Attendees

Staff	IN PERSON	VIA WEBEX
	<b>Casey Silva</b> Program Coordinator	<b>Robert "Scottie" Tripp</b> Program Environmental Tech
	<b>Kristina Flanigan</b> Program Leasing Biologist	<b>Zach Harrison</b> Habitat & Enhancement Section Chief
	<b>Stephen Johnson</b> Program Mapping Biologist	
	<b>Marla Chuffo</b> Program Administrative Officer	
	<b>Mitch Melkonian</b> Program Administrative Specialist	
	<b>Brian Gupton</b> Marine Patrol Officer	
Applicants	IN PERSON	VIA WEBEX
	<b>None</b>	<b>None</b>
Public	IN PERSON	VIA WEBEX
	<b>None</b>	<b>None</b>

## Official Transcript

### **[00:00] Casey Silva**

“Alright, the time is six o’clock, and I would like to call this Shellfish Lease Public Hearing to order. My name is Casey Silva, and I’m the Shellfish Lease and Aquaculture Program Coordinator for the North Carolina Division of Marine Fisheries. I will be serving as the hearing officer tonight.

The Director of the Division authorizes a public hearing for all proposed shellfish leases that meet all biological standards outlined under North Carolina General Statutes and Marine Fisheries Commission rules. DMF staff have already conducted the necessary biological investigations and found the lease generally compliant. The purpose of tonight’s hearing is to receive public comment on the proposed shellfish lease in Carteret County.

Tonight’s hearing is also being conducted virtually, so we have participants joining via telephone and Webex. PowerPoint slides presented tonight are also available on the Division’s website for those participating virtually.

This hearing is being recorded and is public record. All verbal and written communication between members of the public body and division staff regarding the proposed Carteret County lease is deemed public record.

This hearing is a formal process in which we accept public comment only on the proposed shellfish lease that was noticed in the Carteret News Times on February 18<sup>th</sup> and February 25<sup>th</sup>, 2026, and on the Division’s website. No decisions will be made at tonight’s hearing.

This hearing is also not a forum. Each registered speaker will have three minutes to speak and all public comments should be directed to me. Any discussion or discourse should be held until after the hearing concludes. Written comments on these shellfish leases can be submitted to the Division by five p.m. tomorrow, April 1<sup>st</sup>.

If you wish to speak tonight and are not already on the public comment sign-in sheet, you will get a chance to speak after we have gone through all registered speakers.

Now, we will do a roll call of the folks participating virtually. Please be advised, all participants will be recorded. Mitch has been taking attendance as people have joined the meeting. He will now finalize that and go over instructions on how to participate.”

### **[01:40] Mitch Melkonian:**

“Thank you, Casey. We currently do not have any participants joining online. If any participants join later, I will confirm during the public comment portion of tonight’s hearing. Back to you.”

### **[01:50] Casey Silva:**

"Before we begin the public hearing, I will provide a brief overview of the shellfish leasing process and the role of public comment."

**[01:55] Casey Silva:**

"First, some shellfish lease basics. Shellfish leases are public trust waters leased for shellfish aquaculture. When we talk about shellfish aquaculture, we are referring to artificially propagated stocks reared in a controlled environment. This differs from wild shellfish harvesting, as leaseholders actively manage their sites to grow shellfish. Shellfish leases grant private rights to cultivate shellfish in specific areas of public trust waters. These areas remain navigable at your own risk, but the leaseholders have exclusive rights to the shellfish within their designated lease."

**[02:22] Casey Silva:**

"Shellfish leasing is governed by North Carolina law, primarily outlined in NCGS Chapter 113, Article 16. This includes all legislative changes, including changes from over 20 session laws since 1997. Additionally, regulations from the Marine Fisheries Commission and specific decisions made by the Division Director influence lease approvals. These laws and rules establish the standards that must be met for a lease to be granted."

**[02:46] Casey Silva:**

"The shellfish lease application process is comprehensive and includes multiple steps before a lease can be approved. Currently, we are at the stage of the public comment period, which lasts for 30 days and includes this public hearing. Prior to this hearing, we have already published two legal notices to ensure transparency."

**[03:00] Casey Silva:**

"Before this hearing, Division technicians conducted thorough site investigations. These investigations include:

- Marking and Acreage Verification – Ensuring the lease boundaries are properly marked and measured.
- Biological Assessments – Sampling for submerged aquatic vegetation (SAV) and natural shellfish populations using patent tongs to capture both surface and subsurface samples.
- Navigation and Depth Analysis – Evaluating navigational impact at the proposed site on the day of inspection. However, this is only a snapshot and does not characterize year-round public trust usage."

**[03:28] Casey Silva:**

"The purpose of this public hearing is to evaluate whether this proposed shellfish lease is compatible with public trust usage. This hearing is not a vote, it is an opportunity for the Division to collect relevant information about potential impacts on navigation, fishing, and recreation.

Public comment may be submitted in three ways:

1. Tonight, during this hearing.
2. Online through the Division's website.
3. By letter, until the public comment period closes tomorrow at five p.m."

**[03:52] Casey Silva:**

“The Director will use your comments to assess the lease application's compatibility with existing public trust uses and make an informed decision. The possible outcomes include:

- Approval – The lease is granted as proposed.
- Conditional Approval – The lease is approved with required adjustments to address identified concerns.
- Denial – The lease is determined not to meet the defined siting standards.”

**[04:10] Casey Silva:**

"When providing comments, please focus on specific uses of the proposed lease footprint, rather than general concerns about the waterbody. Examples of helpful comments include:

- I use this shoal for recreation seasonally.
- I use this specific footprint for recreational fishing.
- The specific footprint is the only navigable channel to another area.

We are not looking for broad statements about the waterbody or general opinions on shellfish leasing. Comments should be site-specific to help us determine potential conflicts."

**[04:34] Casey Silva:**

"We will now begin the public comment portion of the hearing. Here's how it will proceed:

1. First, I will present information on the proposed shellfish lease.
2. Then, I will invite members of the public who signed up to speak.
3. And finally, I will give the lease applicant the opportunity to make a statement.

With that, I will read the information on tonight's lease.”

**[04:49] Casey Silva:**

“The proposed shellfish lease receiving public comment at this hearing is listed here. As a reminder for all speakers this evening, please be courteous and respectful. If you are discourteous or disruptive, I will ask you to leave.”

**[04:59] Casey Silva:**

“Tonight's lease application is for a 4.46-acre shellfish bottom and water column lease, applied for on August 24<sup>th</sup>, 2025, by William Kerry Harris, located in West Thorofare Bay. The management plan indicates the use of oyster seed on bottom and water column with floating bags for the commercial production of oysters. Division staff conducted site investigations on September 10<sup>th</sup>, September 11<sup>th</sup>, and November 4<sup>th</sup> of 2025, which found 0.78 bushels of shellfish and zero submerged aquatic vegetation, which I will refer to as SAV.”

**[05:26] Casey Silva:**

“Now, I will call on the public for comment. When I call your name, please come to the podium, state your name, if you are representing an organization, where you are from, the lease or leases you are commenting on, and your comments.

Please address your comments directly to me as the Division representative, not to the audience. Your remarks are being recorded; speak loudly and clearly to ensure accurate transcription. You will have three minutes to speak. Kristina will signal when you have one minute remaining by raising one finger and will raise her hand when your time expires.

If anyone has questions, staff and I will be happy to meet with you after the hearing. For those joining via Webex, if you have any questions not pertaining to the lease mentioned tonight, please call or email us. Mitch will place our contact information in the chat or you can write it down.”

**[06:05] Casey Silva:**

“Speakers?”

**[06:08] Casey Silva:**

“That concludes the registered speakers. Was there anyone I missed or anyone who has changed their mind and would like to speak? If so, please raise your hand. Instructions are posted in the chat.”

**[06:17] Casey Silva:**

“Now, I will call on the applicant.”

**[06:20] Casey Silva:**

“William Kerry Harris is not here.”

**[06:22] Casey Silva:**

“If no one else wishes to speak, I will now close this public hearing. I would like to thank you all for your time and participation in this process. Time of closure is 6:06 PM.”