



Pamlico County Shellfish Lease Hearing Meeting Minutes

Tuesday, March 24, 2026

Pamlico County Courthouse
202 Main St, Bayboro, NC 28515
In Person and virtually via Webex

Attendees

Staff

IN PERSON

Casey Silva
Program Coordinator

Stephen Johnson
Program Mapping Biologist

Mitch Melkonian
Program Administrative Specialist

VIA WEBEX

Kristina Flanigan
Program Leasing Biologist

Robert "Scottie" Tripp
Program Environmental Tech

Marla Chuffo
Program Administrative Officer

Zach Harrison
Habitat & Enhancement Section Chief

Applicants

IN PERSON

None

VIA WEBEX

None

Public

IN PERSON

Ken Heath

VIA WEBEX

Danielle Schwartz

Zhijun Li

Rose

Mike Barnebee

Official Transcript

[00:00] Casey Silva

“Alrighty. The time is six o’clock, and I’d 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 these leases generally compliant. The purpose of tonight’s hearing is to receive public comment on the proposed shellfish lease in Pamlico 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 Pamlico 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 Pamlico Daily News on February 18th and February 25th, 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 towards me. Any discussion or discourse should be held until after the hearing concludes. Written comments on this shellfish lease can be submitted to the Division by five p.m. tomorrow, March 25th.

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

Now, we will do a roll call of the participants joining 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.”

[01:57] Mitch Melkonian:

“Thank you, Casey. We currently have two participants joining online. I have recorded their names for our attendance records and inquired if they wish to provide public comment. Later in the meeting, I will call on each participant to provide public comment. I will request they unmute and indicate they may go ahead. Each participant will be allowed three minutes. After everyone speaks, I will ask if anyone else wishes to provide public comment. If anyone does, they will need to raise their hand via Webex. I will post the instructions in the chat on how to do that now. For participants joining by phone, use star three on your keypad to raise your hand. Back to you, Casey.”

[02:32] 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."

[02:42] 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."

[03:11] 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."

[03:37] 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."

[03:55] 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."

[04:29] 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 at five p.m. tomorrow."

[04:56] 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.”

[05:18] 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."

[05:49] 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 the proposed lease.”

[06:09] 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.”

[06:22] Casey Silva:

“Tonight's lease application is for a 0.72-acre shellfish bottom and water column lease, applied for on July 30th, 2025, by Evan R. Gadow, located in Little Bear Creek. The management plan indicates the use of oyster seed on bottom and water column with bottom cages and floating bags for the commercial production of oysters. Division staff conducted site investigations on September 9th and October 8th of 2025, which found zero bushels of shellfish and zero submerged aquatic vegetation.”

[06:54] Casey Silva:

“Now, I will call on the public for comments on the proposed shellfish lease. When I call your name, please stand up, state your name, if you are representing an organization, where you're 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. Stephen will signal when you have one minute remaining by raising one finger and will raise his 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 for you.”

[07:40] Casey Silva:

“First, I have Ken Heath.”

[07:44] Ken Heath:

“I’m just here to observe. Oh, I thought that was just a sign in sheet.”

[07:48] Casey Silva:

“Nope. You’re good. Alright. So, there’s nobody else here. So, now Mitch will call the participants joining us virtually who wish to provide public comment. He will request you unmute yourself after your name is called.”

[08:04] Mitch Melkonian:

“Thank you, Casey. First, I have Danielle Schwartz. Please unmute yourself at my request. You have three minutes. Please go ahead...”

Alright. Next, I have a Zhijun Li. Please unmute at my request and go ahead. You have three minutes...

Okay. Next, we have a Rose. Please unmute at my request. You have three minutes...

Lastly, I have a Mich... Rose, go ahead. If you’re speaking, we’re unable to hear you. Yeah, unfortunately we’re unable to hear you. We will follow up though or go to our website.

And lastly, I have a Michael Barnebee. Please unmute at my request. You have three minutes...

That’s all participants who are joining by Webex. Back to you, Casey.”

[09:31] Casey Silva:

“So, that concludes the registered speakers. Was there anybody I missed or anybody who has changed their mind and would like to speak? Anybody online? No? Okay. So, I will read this because it is in here, but now I will call on the applicant and give him the opportunity if he wishes to speak on his proposed shellfish lease. It is not a requirement.”

[10:02] Casey Silva:

“I would like to call on Evan Gadow to present his proposed shellfish lease. And Evan is not here. So, if nobody else wishes to speak, I will close this public hearing and I would like to thank you for your time and participation in this process. Time of closure is 6:10 PM.”