

Carteret County Shellfish Lease Hearing

# Meeting Minutes

Monday, December 1, 2025



NC DMF Central District Office

5285 Hwy 70 W, Morehead City, NC 28557

In Person and Virtually Via Webex

## Attendance

### Staff

#### In Person

Casey Silva, Shellfish Lease and Aquaculture Program Coordinator

Zach Harrison, Habitat and Enhancement Section Chief

Kristina Flanigan, Leasing Biologist

Stephen Johnson, Mapping Biologist

Cole Grady, Environmental Tech I

Mitch Melkonian, Administrative Specialist

Elizabeth McCormick, Section Administrative Specialist

#### Via Webex

Robert "Scottie" Tripp, Environmental Tech II

### Applicants

#### In Person

C.I. Salts Oyster Company, LLC (Ralph W. Brittingham) – 25-007BL/25-008WC

Rough Atlantic, LLC (Michael T. Dale) – 25-032BL/25-033WC

### Public

#### In Person

Kristy Grayson

Joshua Spears

Hannah Dale

Matthew Elder

Ryan Salter

#### Via Webex

John Shepherd

Jud Ready

## **Official Transcript**

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

The time is six o'clock, and I'd like to call this shellfish lease 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 Habitat and Enhancement Section. I will be serving as the hearing officer tonight.

The purpose of this public hearing is to receive public comment on the proposed shellfish leases in Carteret County. The division staff have conducted site investigations and found that the proposed shellfish lease generally meets the applicable standards for shellfish leasing under North Carolina General Statutes and Marine Fisheries Commission rules reviewed to date.

The Director of the Division authorizes a public hearing for proposed shellfish leases that likely meet all standards for shellfish leasing or for proposed shellfish leases where it is unclear if they meet all standards for shellfish leasing. The Director of the Division has authorized this hearing to receive public comment.

Tonight's hearing is also being conducted virtually, so we have participants joining by telephone and through the Webex virtual meeting application software. Presentation slides displayed tonight are also available on the Division's website for those participating by telephone.

This hearing is being recorded and is public record. All verbal comments, or written communications between members of the public body regarding the transaction of business during this meeting are deemed public record.

This hearing is a formalized process where we only take public comment on the proposed shellfish leases that has been noticed in the Carteret County News Times on October 29<sup>th</sup> and November 5<sup>th</sup> 2025, and on the Division's website. No decisions will be made at tonight's hearing.

This hearing is also not a dialogue or forum. Any discussion or discourse should be held until the hearing concludes. Written comments on the shellfish lease can be submitted to the Division by 5pm tomorrow December 2nd.

If you wish to speak tonight and are not already on the speakers list, you will get a chance to speak after we have gone through the registered speakers.

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

### **[01:58] Mitch Melkonian:**

Thank you, Casey.

As you have signed on, I have been recording your names for our attendance records and asking if you would like to speak.

We currently, have one attendee by the name of John and we are currently waiting to see if he would like to speak.

Later in the meeting, I will go down the list of those who have indicated they wish to speak. When I call your name, I will request you to unmute yourself using your device and will then indicate that you can go ahead. You will be allowed to speak for three minutes.

After everyone on the list has had a chance to speak, I will ask if anyone else wants to speak. If you do, you will need to raise your hand using your device of course . I will post the instructions in the chat on how to do that now.

Back to you Casey.

**[02:42] Casey Silva:**

Alright, so before we begin the public hearing, I will provide a brief overview of the shellfish leasing process and the role of public comments.

**[02:53] 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 within their designated footprint. These areas remain navigable at your own risk, but the leaseholders have exclusive rights to the shellfish within their designated lease.

**[03:20] 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 and denials. These laws and rules establish the standards that must be met for a lease to be granted.

**[03:46] Casey Silva:**

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

**[04:01] Casey Silva:**

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

- Marking & Acreage Verification – Ensuring the lease boundaries are properly marked and measured.
- Biological Assessments – Sampling for submerged aquatic vegetation, or SAV, and natural shellfish populations using patent tongs to capture both surface and subsurface samples.
- Navigation & 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.

**[04:32] Casey Silva:**

The purpose of this public hearing is to evaluate whether these proposed shellfish leases are 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 comments 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 December 2<sup>nd</sup> at 5:00 PM.

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

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

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

**[05:24] Casey Silva:**

When providing comments, please focus on specific uses of the proposed lease footprints, 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.
- Or this 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.

**[05:58] 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 leases.
2. Next, I will invite members of the public who signed up to speak.
3. Finally, I will give each lease applicant the opportunity to make a statement.

With that, I will read the information on the proposed shellfish leases.

**[06:11] Casey Silva:**

The proposed leases receiving public comment at the hearing are 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 first lease application is for a 6.08- acre shellfish bottom and water column lease, applied for on July 29<sup>th</sup>, 2025, by C. I. Salts Oyster Company, LLC, agents Ralph Brittingham and Ryan D. Salter, located in North Bay.

The management plan indicates the use of oyster seed and floating cages for the commercial production of oysters within the footprint of the proposed bottom and water column lease area.

Division staff conducted site investigation on August 25<sup>th</sup> of 2025, which found zero bushels of shellfish per acre and zero submerged aquatic vegetation or SAV.

**[6:56] Casey Silva:**

Second, a lease application for 6.02- acres of shellfish bottom and water column lease, applied for on August 1<sup>st</sup>, by Rough Atlantic, agent Michael T. Dale, located in North River below the bridge.

The management plan indicated the use of oyster seed for the commercial production of oysters within the footprint of the proposed bottom and water column lease.

Division staff conducted a site investigation on September 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>, 2025, which found 0.07 of a bushel of shellfish per acre and zero SAV.

**[07:25] Casey Silva:**

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

Please address your comments directly to me as the Division representative, and 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 any questions, staff and I will be happy to meet with you after the hearing. For those on Webex, if you have any questions not pertaining to the leases mentioned tonight, please call, or email us. Mitch will place our contact information in the chat for you or you can write it down from the last slide when it is displayed.

**[08:11] Casey Silva:**

Anybody? Awesome

**[08:15] Casey Silva:**

Now, Mitch will call the folks who are joining us via Webex or by phone who wish to speak. He will request you unmute yourself after he calls your name.

**[08:25] Mitch Melkonian:**

Of the two participants online, none wish to speak. Back to you Casey.

**\*Inaudible chatter\***

**[08:34] Casey Silva:**

Alright, so that concludes registered speakers. Was there anyone I missed or anybody who has changed their mind and would like to speak? Instructions are posted in the chat for those on Webex.

No one, Mitch?

**[08:52] Mitch Melkonian:**

Nope.

**[08:54] Casey Silva:**

Now, I will call on the applicants and give them an opportunity if they wish to speak on their proposed shellfish leases. This is not a requirement of the applicants.

As a reminder, you have three minutes to speak. Kristina will hold up one finger when you have one minute remaining, and her hand when you reach three minutes.

So first I would like to call C. I. Salts Oyster Company. Ralph or Ryan? No? Okay, thanks.

**[09:18] Casey Silva:**

Okay I would now like to call Rough Atlantic.

**[09:20] Micheal T. Dale:**

No, thank you.

**[09:22] Casey Silva:**

Awesome. Is there anybody else who would like to comment on the proposed shellfish leases?

No? Alrighty, if nobody wishes to speak, I will close this public hearing. I would like to thank you for your time and participation in this process. Time of closure is 6:09 PM. Now that this hearing has concluded, I will take any questions that you guys might have.