

Onslow County Shellfish Lease Hearing

Meeting Minutes

Tuesday, April 22, 2025

Holly Ridge Community Center
404 Sound Rd., Holly Ridge, NC 28445
In Person and virtually via Webex

Attendees

Staff

In Person

Casey Silva, Shellfish Lease and Aquaculture Program Coordinator
Zach Harrison, Habitat & Enhancement Section Chief
Kristina Flanigan, Program Conservation Biologist
Mitch Melkonian, Program Administrative Specialist
Cole Grady, Environmental Tech I

Via Webex

Marla Chuffo, Program Administrative Officer
Elizabeth McCormick, Section Administrative Specialist
Robert “Scottie” Tripp, Environmental Tech II

Applicants

In Person

Troy T. Davis
23-030BL/23-031WC
SeWee Shellfish, LLC, agents Alberto “Albie” Solana and Jonathan Kent
24-019BL/24-020WC
Kelly M. Robertson and Brassai M. Mustin
24-025WC
Gator Bay Oyster Company, LLC, agent Nelson C. Bullock
24-028BL/24-029WC
Middle Sound Mariculture, LLC, agent James M. Hargrove
24-034BL/24-035WC
Big Cypress Mariculture, LLC, agent John W. “Jack” Eynon
24-039BL/24-040WC

General Public

In Person

Miranda Hargrove
William Snyder

Mitchell Lassard
Charles Norris
Justin Tuttle
Chris Matteo
CD Merritt
Austin Dishman
Tate Tucker
John Koloski
Larry Strother
Tim Davis
Tim A. Davis
Jefferson P. Davis
Cody Faison
Cary Chappell
Earl Yopp
Barry Yopp
Joshua Thompson
Alyssa Dye
Ramona Davis
Coraliss Sandlin
Christopher Sandlin
Toby Midgett
Scott Norris
Steve Evanko
Trudy Solomon
Kary Robertson, Tussock Point Shellfish
Tori Davis
Via Webex
Chelsea Bullock
T. Talton
Margaret Hargrove
Call-in User (980-621-****)
Call-in User (910-389-****)

Official Transcript

[00:00] Casey Silva:

The time is 6:00 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 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 Onslow County. Division staff have conducted site investigations and found that the proposed shellfish leases generally meet 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 folks participating by telephone and through the Webex virtual meeting application. PowerPoint slides presented tonight are also available on the Division's website for those participating by telephone.

This hearing is being recorded and is a 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 have been noticed in the Jacksonville Daily News on March 18th and March 25th, 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 after the hearing concludes. Written comments on these shellfish leases can be submitted to the Division by 5pm tomorrow.

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 signed in to the meeting. He will now finalize that and go over the information on how to participate.

[02:06] 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. I believe that I got everyone as they logged in.

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 unmute you and 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. I will post the instructions in the chat on how to do that now.

Now, turning the meeting back over to Casey.

[02:40] 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.

[02:49] 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.

[03:28] 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.

[03:56] 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.

[04:12] 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 (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.

[04:50] 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 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 at 5:00 PM.

[05:19] 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 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.

[05:41] 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.
- 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.

[06:12] 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. 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 lease.

[06:34] Casey Silva:

The proposed shellfish leases 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.

[06:53] Casey Silva:

Tonight's first lease application is for a 9.83-acre shellfish bottom and water column lease, applied for on July 28th, 2023, by Troy T. Davis, located in Ellis Cove.

The management plan indicates the use of oyster, clam, scallop, and mussel seed and cultch on bottom, bottom gear, and floating gear (bags, cages, and other systems) for the commercial production of oysters, clams, scallops, and mussels within the footprint of the proposed bottom and water column lease area.

Division staff conducted site investigations on August 27th, and September 4th, 5th, 9th, 10th, and 11th, 2024, which found 2.48 bushels of shellfish per acre and zero submerged aquatic vegetation, which I will refer to as SAV.

[07:39] Casey Silva:

Next, a lease application for a 1.01-acre shellfish bottom and water column lease, applied for on April 29th, 2024, by SeWee Shellfish, LLC, agents Alberto Solana and Jonathan Kent, located in Stones Bay.

The management plan indicates the use of oyster and clam seed, and bottom gear and floating gear (cages) for the commercial production of oysters and clams within the footprint of the proposed bottom and water column lease.

Division staff conducted a site investigation on June 3rd, 2024, which found 3.64 bushels of shellfish per acre and 8% SAV.

[08:14] Casey Silva:

Next, a lease application for a 1.02-acre shellfish water column lease, applied for on July 1st, 2024, by Kelly M. Robertson and Brassai M. Mustin, located in New River below 172 bridge.

The management plan indicates the use of oyster seed and floating gear (bags) for the commercial production of oysters within the footprint of the proposed water column lease.

Division staff conducted a site investigation on August 19th, 2024, which found zero bushels of shellfish per acre and zero SAV.

[08:50] Casey Silva:

Next, a lease application for a 3.82-acre shellfish bottom and water column lease, applied for on July 30th, 2024, by Gator Bay Oyster Co., LLC, agent Nelson C. Bullock, located in Ellis Cove.

The management plan indicates the use of oyster, clam, scallop, and penshell seed, and bottom gear and floating gear (cages) for the commercial production of oysters, clams, scallops, and penshells within the footprint of the proposed bottom and water column lease.

Division staff conducted a site investigation on August 27th, 2024, which found 1.48 bushels of shellfish per acre and zero SAV.

[09:31] Casey Silva:

Next, a lease application for a 9.18-acre shellfish bottom and water column lease, applied for on July 30th, 2024, by Middle Sound Mariculture, LLC, agent James M. Hargrove, located in New River.

The management plan indicates the use of oyster, clam, and scallop seed, and floating gear (bags and cages) and suspended longline systems for the commercial production of oysters, clams, and scallops within the footprint of the proposed bottom and water column lease.

Division staff conducted site investigations on September 9th, 11th, and 12th, 2024, which found 0.09 bushels of shellfish per acre and zero SAV.

[10:11] Casey Silva:

Lastly, a lease application for a 2.73-acre shellfish bottom and water column lease, applied for on August 2nd, 2024, by Big Cypress Mariculture, LLC, agent John W. Eynon, located in Sneads Creek.

The management plan indicates the use of oyster, clam, and scallop seed and bottom gear and floating gear (bags and suspended longline system) for the commercial production of oysters, clams, and scallops within the footprint of the proposed bottom and water column lease.

Division staff conducted site investigations on September 17th and 18th, 2024, which found 2.35 bushels of shellfish per acre and zero SAV.

[10:56] Casey Silva:

Alright, 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 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 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.

[11:33] Casey Silva:

First person I have is William Snyder.

[12:12] William Snyder:

Alright, well I'm gonna tell you. I'm William Snyder, the current chairman of the Topsail Island Shoreline Protection Commission and I'm a resident of Topsail Beach. The Topsail Island Shoreline Protection Commission is composed of representatives of the three Island community towns and including their mayors and board of commission representatives from Pender and Onslow County. As a commission, we have become increasingly concerned about conflicts between shellfish leases and other uses of our natural resource waters. That includes commercial and recreation, recreational fishing, boating, kayaking and other coastal land and water uses, not to mention the potential impacts on property values and aesthetics. Due in part to moratoriums on additional shellfish leases in our joining counties, we have noted a significant rise in shellfish lease sighting and lease applications within our local waters. Tonight, you're collecting public comments for six additional leases in the public waters of Onslow County, and last week, you collected public comments for three additional leases in the public waters of Pender County. Your own interactive shellfish leasing map shows much of our area as a cumulative impact area, suggesting the Division of Marine Fisheries's own concerns about the carrying capacity of additional leases in our area. The Topsail Island Shoreline Protection Commission has voted unanimously to support a temporary moratorium on additional shellfish leases in our area until we can assess their cumulative impacts on other uses of our natural resource waters. Representative Carson Smith has recently submitted legislation, HB841 wherein he calls for a statewide study on shellfish aquaculture leasing and current moratoriums on shellfish leasing by the North Carolina Collaboratorium. In the spirit of these concerns, the Topsail Island Shoreline Protection Commission, respectively, requests that the North Carolina Division of Marine Fisheries delay consideration for any additional shellfish leases in our local public trust waters until conflicting uses and carrying capacity issues can be resolved. Thank you very much.

[14:40] Casey Silva:

Next person I have is Mitchell Lassard.

[14:45] Mitchell Lassard:

I'm Mitchell Lassard, and I'm a commercial fisherman, retired in Onslow County, Sneads Ferry. I have some evidence here to present. I'll give it to you. And the first thing is for Sneads Creek. Whoever did these impact studies, they need to come down here and talk to the fishermen, because we're the ones that's been here for 60 something years, fishing, oystering, scalloping, and know the area and know how to catch them, because the person you sit down don't know. The first picture there, you can see it. I worked one hour and caught two bushels of oysters in Sneads Creek, in the area, because it's proposed. You can go in a proposed area because it's not legal. Well, it's not illegal for me to go in there, and I did it for one reason—To show you how much production is in that area that they took in. Next thing, who provides the grants for aquaculture? Is it the Feds or the state? I'm asking a question. Who's providing the money for the grants that come down for the aquaculture program. Because I own the garden, a lease garden, and they wanted me to go aquaculture. They kept pushing aquaculture. Okay, I'd like to answer.

[16:17] Casey Silva:

So, this period of time, right now, is for you to give your public comments on these proposals. We can discuss other things after.

[16:21] Mitchell Lassard:

Okay, but what I'm saying, I'd like to answer on that—Find out where the money's coming from, if taxpayers is paying for it, or who's paying for it. Is state paying for it? You know, we'd like some answers. I'm saying all of us, okay, and there's a bad impact statement out there, and I don't know if y'all have got that office up there, and looked at some of these gardens, the bird fecal matter, okay, is real bad on these cages. How do you get rid of fecal matter on cages. You just can't wash it off. Okay? Lot of times, and I've dealt with this a lot, you got to send it to Raleigh, and they have people up there to test it and find out what's in this fecal matter. When you're going to ingest oysters, scallops, or whatever. And the second part of that you're taking in the biggest scallop area in New River, already wild-caught scallops. And that's all I have to say here.

[17:26] Casey Silva:

Next, I have Charles Norris.

[17:48] Casey Silva:

Next, I have Justin Tuttle.

[17:56] Justin Tuttle:

Hi, I'm Justin Tuttle, and I just really wanted to speak as a public citizen that, you know, a lot of these leases, I understand there are certain things, you know, usage, things like that, fishing, which I'm an avid fishman. I love fishing. And personally, when I'm around oyster leases, I notice that that fishing is much better, especially some of these areas where you can see on the map, there's just nothing on the bottom. It's really just the sand bottom. Anytime you bring structure in there, it really offers a lot more space for any kind of fin fish to grow. And I mean, yeah, there are some issues with certain areas, but these areas here, I really can't see anything. But it just really takes a barren area and put gets a little bit more to offer for everything. So, it's commercial fishing and recreational, just anyone out there to enjoy it. So that's all I wanted to say. Thank you.

[18:51] Casey Silva:

Next, I have Chris Matteo.

Also, I noticed a lot of the people that have proposed leases are signed up on this. I will be calling all of you guys at the end, so don't think that I just skipped over your names.

[19:09] Chris Matteo

Hi, I'm Chris Mateo, head of the North Carolina Shellfish Growers Association, also vice president of East Coast Shellfish Growers Association. One of the things I've been saying for years at these public hearings is, I feel for the folks in these areas where things are getting slightly crowded, main issue was there were preemptive moratoriums put in play to the north and south of these areas, which funneled all new growers basically to these areas. We have moratoriums from Cedar Island down through Brunswick County, and unfortunately, to the north and south of Topsail and Pender areas, you've got waters closed to new leases. Addressing property values and aesthetics. There's been no evidence that shellfish farms have a negative impact on real estate values. Real estate values have been doing quite well in the area here with plenty of appreciation last few years. Lease apps are actually down versus several years ago. Rep Carson's, Carson Smith's bill is not proposing new moratoria, thankfully, and it's not likely to pass, unfortunately for the folks in this area. There's been plenty of impact studies done over the course of time, and quite frankly, this area may be relatively new to intensive aquaculture, but the rest of the East Coast and West Coast of this country, it's been in play for a very long time, and the positive impacts are irrefutable. As far as grant money, very few people get grant money in this business. It's mostly funded out of pocket, so it's not a state or federal thing. You know, I work very hard in Raleigh and DC while managing my own farms. And I can tell you that, yeah, there's, this is 99% funded by private funds. As far as the fecal coliform issue, there's shellfish sanitation. And yes, they sample the waters frequently, and they have models that shut down areas to shellfishing after a particular amount of rainfall in a 24-hour period. So yeah, we're not we're not selling polluted shellfish at all, and we're not granted leases in polluted areas. That's

really all I have to say. I do support all these existing and new growers expanding in this area. And as far as folks in the area who don't want to see the expansion in this particular area, I get it. The best thing you can do is lobby folks and talk to your representatives and senators and try and open up waters to the north and south of here. And then people have a higher probability of getting at lease there and not necessarily here. Thank you.

[22:14] Casey Silva:

There's a name on this list that I cannot read. It starts with a C.

[22:18] CD Merritt:

That would be me. Imma talk to y'all, but I'm looking at them. The reality of this whole situation is this.

[22:27] Casey Silva:

Sir, you have to direct your comments to me.

[22:30] CD Merritt:

Okay. The reality of this situation is this. As a viable, still active, lifelong commercial harvester of native, wild shellfish and a fin fisherman and take rev miles, comps, whatever. The problem with these floating cages, one you cannot traverse through them, that area once they are given. You can't even drive a boat through there, period, without getting something in your motor, period. Every single place that these columns have been given over the last few years, in front of Permuda Island, at the Old Landing, Everett Bay, the horseshoe dump, back of Traps, the ones that are proposed at Sneads Creek, the ones that are up the river at New River, they are all places that I have commercially harvested and earned a living. Now, everyone here that is a fisherman understands that shellfish are not present all the time. So, the sampling that I see, the sample boat go out all the time, they may not have caught anything at that present point in time, there hasn't been any clams or oysters in the river since Florence come through, not known. They're just now starting to try to make a comeback. And every single place that these floating columns and these leases are, are places that I have earned a living, every single one of them, especially Permuda Island and at Old Landing. I clam that stuff my whole life, oystered there too. Can't even drive a boat through there anymore, which means you can't go run mullets, you can't do anything. The floating cages, I would like for somebody, before they issue any more, to go there and take the floating cages, once they pull them out of water when they do ever so periodically, to pressure wash them so that their shellfish get the proper water flow to grow. And tell me just how many native, wild species oyster spat are stuck to the bottom of them. Because I truly feel like that is the decline of the oyster species between Permuda Island, Surf City bridge, and the 172 bridge right on up to the river, because every time they pull these oysters out, these cages out of the water and pressure wash them in the parking lot, anybody that knows anything about oysters knows that wild specs stick to anything plastic, and all these cages are in prime spat area, and there has been a decline ever since they've been there. That's all I get? Good luck.

[25:44] Casey Silva:

Alrighty, I have an Austin Dishman next.

[25:53] Austin Dishman:

I'm a commercial fisherman, and I harvest shellfish in the New River. The number six on the map, the one in Sneads Creek, that's all, there's so many wild clams there now. They're flourishing this year, and there's so many clams along the banks of there that it's unreal that the site study didn't show that was there, and also, that area, as well as the third one, number three there, I gillnet those areas every night of the week during the summer. And it would really be a shame to have all that nonsense in the way of fish migration that flows up and down the river, going through the bridge they got to go to one side of the river the other, and they really favor that side. And what does that do for the fish migration? It it's all getting in the way of natural stuff, and it's really not good. That's all I got to say.

[27:10] Casey Silva:

Last on my list I have Tate Tucker.

[27:16] Casey Silva:

Good evening, y'all. Tate Tucker, Topsail Beach. I've lived here my entire life, and I just want to say this whole area, Topsail Island area, it's a unique area. It's consisted of two counties and three towns, North Topsail Beach, Surf City, Topsail Beach, and it's Onslow County and it's Pender County, it's a very unique place. And as you can hear from these guys, this part of Onslow County where this is coming from, comes from an old-time fishing tradition, right? And none of these leases that I see or anybody that I know from around here. So, that's one thing that's going to get in some people's crawl, first of all. I'm against all six of 'em, and I'll tell you why. I was at the meeting last week in Topsail Beach for the three that are coming in Topsail Island. And I don't know if I have to go through them by name, but I'm opposed to all six of them, all right. And here's some perspective right next door, New Hanover County, right next door. They have a total of eight leases in New Hanover County, right, for a total of 14 acres of shellfish. Between today and last week this time, so within one week's time, we have over 30 acres coming up for approval for shellfish, right? And we get six minutes to talk about six places tonight. That just seems unfair. That's 30 seconds per lease that we could easily talk for hours about it like they were saying, whether it's fish migration, whether the amount of spat, whether it's depth of water, whether it's native versus unnative species of shellfish. So, in my idea, this whole process is flawed, we get exactly three minutes to state the case on something that's already from the dates of some of these leases have already started a year, a year and a half ago. We get three minutes. It doesn't make any sense. So, I'll just say it this way. The gentleman earlier said that we need to talk to our representative, I've had, and I don't know what's going on up there, but every one of our neighboring counties is closed to a moratorium, and we're open. So, like I said last week, say this whole eastern seaboard of oysters is a is a boat. We're the hole in the boat, right? And they're filling it just as fast as they can, with leases, as much as they can. And I don't think we can keep going like this if we don't have an organized plan. If we don't fill that hole, the boat is going to sink, and it just puts a lot of people, these guys, livelihood at stake as well as we don't know the long-term effects of all this stuff. And until we do that, I think we need to take a complete pause, generally. We have already, in this area between Pender and Onslow County, 740 acres, which is double the amount of Carteret County that has Bogue Sound and everything else. Until we know density studies about like how much this can hold, our whole miles of waterway can hold. I don't know why we're approving anything else. Thank you.

[30:27] Casey Silva:

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

[30:33] Mitch Melkonian:

First, I have Chelsea Bullock. If you wish to speak, please feel free to unmute at my request and go ahead. You have three minutes.

[30:45] Mitch Melkonian:

Next, I have a call-in user by phone. Phone number starting with 980-621. If you wish to speak, please unmute by pushing **6 on your keypad. You have three minutes.

[31:14] Mitch Melkonian:

Next, I have another call-in user. Phone number 910-389. If you wish to speak, please go ahead. You have three minutes.

[31:22] Mitch Melkonian:

Lastly, I have Margaret Hargrove. If you wish to speak, please unmute at my request. You have three minutes.

[31:35] Mitch Melkonian:

That looks like all participants joining by Webex. Back to you, Casey.

[31:38] Casey Silva:

Alrighty, so 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. If you're online, instructions are posted in the chat.

[31:47] Charles Norris:

Can I ask one more question? What happened to all the petitions that I sent in? Six petitions against these leases.

[31:51] Casey Silva:

I'm sorry, if you would like to make a comment, could you step up to the podium please?

[31:55] Audience Attendee:

I'll get up there, Charles. What he's talking about is actual petitions that I hand delivered to Morehead City and mailed in. Okay? Zach, okay, I personally handed to him up there all these petitions and stuff. Is that part of the evidence going in on this?

[32:08] Casey Silva:

So, right now is about making public comment on the proposed leases. If you have questions about petitions and things like that, we can address them after the hearing.

[32:13] Audience Attendee:

Okay, I just want to get them addressed. You know that that's all we want here. A fair chance.

[32:22] Casey Silva:

Want to come up?

[32:27] Cody Faison:

Hey, my name is Cody Faison. I'm here today on behalf of, I'm a local oyster farmer. I'm a co-owner of Ghost Fleet Oyster Company. I'm here with, also with a board member of the North County Shellfish Growers Association. And what I'd like to say is I approve all six right now, basically because it's clear to me that these leases are individuals that are already in the oyster farming community and are doing things to better their oyster farms to make this a more successful industry. I know most of them very well, and I can tell you that there is a lot of effort in designing and putting these leases into play. I understand the concern from so many people today. I just want to reiterate that you have more than three minutes to speak because you are welcome to write a letter and send it into the DMF. We're, as a local oyster farmer, I welcome any kind of criticism, any critiques of what we're doing day to day, because we want to be better, we want to hear your concerns, we want to see this oyster industry thrive with local fishing. You know, I'm also a charter captain. I run a ton of eco tours to my farm. I provide a lot of jobs for captains in the winter, as well as, you know, keeping my crew going. So, feel free to reach out anytime to me, and I can help point you in a good direction. Thank you.

[34:22] Casey Silva:

Was there anybody else in the room that would like to make public comment? Mitch, did you have anybody online?

[34:28] Mitch Melkonian:

We do not, no.

[34:30] Casey Silva:

Okay, 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 will 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.

First, I would like to call on Troy T. Davis to present their proposed shellfish lease.

[34:48] Casey Silva:

Next, I would like to call on Alberto Solana and Jonathan Kent.

[35:33] Alberto “Albie” Solana:

Someone had mentioned that they didn't think anybody up there was from the area. I happen to live in Sneads Ferry. I've been living here for quite a while. I have a commercial fishing business that I run out of Wrightsville Beach. I have another oyster lease in Traps Bay, and, you know, I fish the area myself. And the main reason I got into oyster farming was because the commercial fishing industry is getting harder and harder to make a living, especially with the regulations, the season closures. So, I started doing this, and I kind of mix it up between the both. But, you know, everyone else that's applying for these leases also live in the area and fish in the water, just like everybody else does. That's all I have to say.

[36:09] Casey Silva:

Next would like to call on Kelly M. Robertson and Brassai M. Mustin.

[36:25] Brassai Mustin:

I'm the daughter of a commercial fishing heritage in Onslow County. My father has a sink net boat that goes out of New River. We're one of the last large commercial boats that are making it out there, besides shrimp boats. And we started this venture into aquaculture to get him out of the ocean. As the guy before me had said, Mr. Albie, that we're transitioning into aquaculture, and that's what the state is kind of pushing people towards. We have a 1909 deeded bottom that has been producing oysters since 1909. We have reefs on the north end of our farm or the western of our farm, and we have our aquaculture on the eastern of our farm. And we're seeking the water column to look at different ways of growing to see if one way helps better than the other. And as a family and as an investor in Onslow County, we pay our taxes on our deeded bottom, and we want to continue to grow oysters here. People have been eating oysters off of this franchise for since the 1940s, 1930s, and that's really why we're going for our water column, is just to continue that and keep that tradition alive with the culture of this fishing village. That's all I have. Thank you.

[37:53] Casey Silva:

Next, I would like to call on Nelson C. Bullock of Gator Bay Oyster Company to present their proposed shellfish lease.

[38:08] Nelson Bullock:

Good evening. My name is Nelson Bullock, and my wife and I started Gator Bay Oyster Company in 2021. I've been involved in oyster farming for over 14 years now and have witnessed firsthand all the positive impacts the shellfish aquaculture on both the environment and our communities. Oysters naturally filter and clean the water, they create habitat, and they also help stabilize the shoreline. Shellfish farming is among the most sustainable forms of aquaculture, offering significant ecological and economic benefits. It's also deeply rooted in North Carolina's maritime history. The state's first shellfish leases were issued in 1858, which predates Oregon statehood. I'm applying for a shellfish lease in Ellis Cove and New River, lease number 24-029. I've carefully selected the site to avoid major recreational routes. The lease—at its closest point to shoreline—is 85 feet, and all gear will be properly marked and maintained to ensure safe navigation. I am also committed to being a good

neighbor on the water. Oyster farms enhance habitat, increase local marine life. Every cage we pull up teems with shrimp, crabs, small fish, and we get stuff like spiny lobsters, different species of snapper, and juvenile groupers that are small and not quite ready to go offshore. These farms become an integral part of the ecosystem. Thank you for considering my lease. My goal is to grow this business responsibly, support a local economy, and contribute to the health of North Carolina's waters. Thank you.

[39:45] Casey Silva:

Next, I would like to call on James M. Hargrove of Middle Sound Mariculture to present their proposed shellfish lease.

[39:56] James Hargrove:

Thank you. My name is James Hargrove, I'm the owner and operator of Middle Sound Mariculture, we have a proposed lease for tonight's hearing. This lease was cited in a nice rectangular fashion because we found over the years that having a lease that's very concise allows us to fully manage on that lease. It's a lot easier to pull straight lines of cages on a rectangular-type lease than it is in one that is configured to miss certain environmental parameters in the water. We all know that oysters are keystone species. They can filter up to 50 gallons of water a day. In my opinion, if you're not for shellfish aquaculture, which, by the way, in 2023 shellfish aquaculture in North Carolina was three times higher than the wild harvest was. If you're not for shellfish aquaculture, you're against clean water, because oysters filter water better than a Britta. And it seems like there's a lot of people here that are in opposition to that. And you know, in some locations, that may be rightfully so. The amount of leases in the New River, the reason why we chose to site that there is because there are very few for one and for two, the surrounding environment is very conducive to oyster aquaculture, because we talked about shellfish sanitation earlier. And in other locations, we have five other lease locations, most of those will close within an inch and a half of rain. In this location, it's the threshold is much higher, which allows us to have a consistency in our product. So, for business development, being able to have oysters in a consistent manner allows us to maintain our clientele and our business base. There's a lot of things you could go into, as far as other ecosystem services, with the shellfish providing habitat, and we heard earlier that could affect migrations, but my experience of being on the water, that's three minutes, oh, is that when we put these cages out there, every time we handle one of these cages, shrimp, fish, crabs and all commercially available species, the babies are falling off of these cages. And oyster reefs are a known nursery habitat. The state itself has invested millions and millions and millions of dollars into providing oyster reefs in the state, and we're taking, talking about grants, my own personal money, and sweat and blood, and putting into this with a passion, so that we can provide for our family and provide cleaner water and provide the shrimp and the fish and a place to live, because right now, based on the state's accounting, there's very minimal shellfish in these locations. So by adding millions of shellfish, which will be with all these leases, if they're granted, it would be probably five, 6 million oysters going out there in each one of those oysters, if that's per day, if there was a million oysters on that lease, 50 million gallons of water per day are being filtered, just that one lease.

[43:08] Audience Attendee:

Except for the ones that get stuck on the cages, right?

[43:19] Casey Silva:

Lastly, I would like to call on John Eynon of Big Cypress Mariculture.

[43:37] John "Jack" Eynon:

Thanks to everyone for coming out and sharing your concerns. My name is John Eynon. I go by Jack. I'm the owner of Big Cypress Mariculture, which I started around a year and a half ago. I also work full time for UNCW Shellfish Hatchery, so that's where a lot of my aquaculture experience comes from. Learned a lot from Nelson Bullock, who's also applying here. And this would be my first water column lease for me, it's really an opportunity for me to get my business off the ground. I chose this location in Sneads Creek because it is tucked away. It's not a navigational hazard, you know, it's not impacting anyone's views, which I know have been issues

with other lease proposals. And you know, one other thing I'd like to mention is that the proposed lease is now a little over half the size of what I initially proposed. So, I did modify the application to remove that second cove area that runs into the tidal creek back there. So hopefully that alleviates some of the concerns with conflicting uses. I was notified by DMF several months ago that I received some letters of concern about the lease, and they couldn't give me more details, but I did provide my contact information so people could reach out to me directly, hoping to foster some discussions about this. I only heard from one gentleman who was concerned about losing access to wild harvest back there, which has obviously been echoed here tonight. I proceeded with the lease because I did walk the whole thing for a couple hours with a clam rake and found very few shellfish. I know, based off DMF's random sampling, they also found very few shellfish. You know, I'm not here to doubt whether the wild oysters here would or would not make a comeback in this particular spot, but I do know that I'll be making very productive use of this area for growing shellfish and providing a lot of the environmental benefits that some of the other farmers have presented here. As far as, you know, other concerns about fishing and other uses—You know, I'm more than happy to talk with people and try to figure out how I can mitigate whatever those impacts might be. Whether it's by using certain gear types, positioning these gear in certain places, or orienting it a certain way. I'll also be sure to keep the farm very tidy. Keep lines tight, everything well marked, so it's easy to access within the lease. So that's my piece. I just want to thank everyone again for coming out and sharing concerns.

[46:10] Casey Silva:

Is there anybody else who would like to comment on any of these proposed shellfish leases?

[46:19] Larry Strother:

My name is Larry Strother, S, T, R, O, T, H, E, R, and I'm the chairman of the Beach Inlet Sound Advisory Committee for North Topsail Beach. And I am Vice Chairman of the Topsail Island Shoreline Protection Commission, which includes the three islands. This is, I don't think that we mean for this to be a combative issue, and of course, it's hard for it not to be. Our concern as the islands, which is what we're representing, is that we feel like there need to be more studies done when the leases are asked for, not necessarily at this point in time, after you've already done everything that you're going to do, because there's a lot of the leases that won't bother us. There are some leases that are going to affect the recreational activity, the fishing and everything else that takes place around the islands, which is what we provide when we represent the recreation part of our beaches. So, we're not opposed to shellfish leasing. We are opposed to not having it studied before it gets to this stage, because it's been the applications were made back in '24 so we feel like that. Maybe the people that would have been involved and may be against it or for it, need to discuss what's going to happen to it. So, we're not and of course, we feel like that a lot of what's happening here is, like someone said before, is because of the moratoriums that have been put against around us, so it's coming this direction, and we just want to make sure that our recreational activities and our fishing that's been going on for all these years is going to be able to continue and cohabitate with the leases. And that's where we feel like we're down in but we're not against shellfish leases. We're against it not being studied to determine that the place they're going is not going to affect two situations. That's it. Thank you.

[48:39] Casey Silva:

Anybody else?

You've already spoken, I'm sorry.

Alright, if no one else 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 6:50 PM.