



Alaska Grown Pacific Oysters

2024

ALASKA SHELLFISH GROWERS ASSOCIATION (ASGA)

Legislative Priorities & Informational Handout

ABOUT ASGA

The Alaska Shellfish Growers Association (ASGA) is a private nonprofit organization representing shellfish farmers and those interested in developing shellfish aquaculture in Alaska. ASGA was formed in the early 1980s when Alaska residents experimenting with suspended oyster culture ran into a confusing wall of government permits.

Currently, ASGA has over 130 supporting members that range from shellfish farmers, business sponsors, and allied organizations. The ASGA Board of Directors consists of shellfish farmers from different regions across the Alaska. ASGA has grown to become a strong voice for Alaska shellfish farmers, through member outreach with government agencies and legislatures.

Successful advocacy and grants for education, research, and business development have been key to building support for shellfish farming in the State of Alaska. To support the development of the Mariculture industry, ASGA works with other key organizations and task forces to identify barriers and turn challenges into opportunities.



Alaska Grown Geoduck & Pacific Oysters



ASGA LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES

We greatly appreciate legislative support for shellfish growers, and sincerely hope you will continue to work with us to build an industry that will meet that potential.

We encourage legislators to:

- **Avoid cuts to an industry that produces economic activity**
- **Support the Environmental Health Lab (EHL) as an essential service**
- **Support a limit/cap on the Mariculture Revolving Loan interest rate**
- **Support toxin testing to assist growers and local communities in adapting to impacts from a changing ocean chemistry.**
- **Pass state budgets on time to avoid destabilizing the shellfish industry.**
- **Be aware that shifting expenses to industry through additional user fees may not result in actual dollar savings, it could increase public health risk, and it will slow industry growth.**

ASGA LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES

1.) SUPPORT FOR STATE OF ALASKA ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH LAB (EHL) AS AN ESSENTIAL SERVICE & NEW THREATS FROM TOXINS LOOMING

Government Shutdown Threats

The Alaskan shellfish industry ceases to exist without a functioning state shellfish authority. Shellfish growers do not have a federal alternative to continue harvesting. There needs to be support for the EHL Lab as an essential service. The threat of Government shutdowns hurts producers because toxin testing is a requirement to sell commercial shellfish products.

The fiscal crisis of 2015 left Alaska's growers unsure if they needed to layoff workers at the height of their harvest season, overall uncertainty continued in 2016, and forecasts for longer legislative sessions and potential budget delays are an ongoing concern to growers. The demand for Alaskan oysters coincides with the tourist season. When local oysters are not available, restaurants will import from outside Alaska and may stick with outside products for greater predictability. The potential loss to a farm is significant.

We need legislators to pass budgets on time, and to appropriately fund the agencies responsible for regulation of the shellfish industry.

Decreasing DEC Support and New Threats from Toxins Looming

The Alaska DEC has steadily decreased support for shellfish growers, first shifting the cost and labor of water monitoring over to growers. And each year the threat of an end to state supported toxin testing leaves farmers uncertain about potential fee increases. With changing ocean chemistry and more frequent harmful algal blooms, shellfish toxins (like PST, AST and DST) are an increasing threat to Alaska's coastal waters. Yet, Alaska has NO general program for toxin testing for subsistence or recreational harvesters. Currently, the only formal toxin testing in the state is done by the commercial shellfish industry. Commercial growers gather, harvest and shuck product, and freeze and pay for shipping to the lab. The lab pays *only* for the test itself. These commercial tests are a benefit to local coastal communities. When toxins are reported at commercial farms; this can be communicated widely, making it safer for citizens who harvest other shellfish in nearby coves and bays for personal consumption.

At a time, when **the threats of toxins are increasing, the state should be performing more testing**, increasing vigilance, and making it easy for farmers to harvest and test frequently. Lab user fees of \$125/test (x30) would cripple growers, and the increased cost would cause some to reduce the frequency that they harvest and test. A reduction in testing puts adjacent communities at greater risk, reducing the public health benefit of frequent testing in local bays.

With both the water monitoring and toxin testing, the cost and labor burden of ensuring clean water and toxin free shellfish has already begun to shift

to a struggling industry. Given the significant benefits the public derives from both the toxin and water monitoring testing, state resources can justifiably support these efforts and allow growers a stable base to grow an industry that has huge potential to strengthen Alaska's economy.

2.) SUPPORT FOR LIMIT ON MARICULTURE REVOLVING LOAN INTEREST RATE

The Alaska Mariculture industry is growing and the Mariculture revolving loan program was meant to encourage and help producers. Currently, the interest rate is at 9% for the Mariculture Revolving Loan. High interest rates are hurting commercial shellfish growers.

3.) ASMI POSITION

There is potential to change to Alaska Seafood Marketing Institute (ASMI)'s legislative charter language to allow mariculture products to be promoted through ASMI. Adding this legislation would open the door for potential fees or taxes for shellfish and seaweed farmers. We conducted a short survey with our ASGA Grower members and the results indicated that most oppose this legislation.

As an organization we are not in favor of changing legislature language to include shellfish in ASMI.

STATE OF THE SHELLFISH INDUSTRY

According to the data available from Alaska SeaGrant "State of the Mariculture Industry in Alaska, 2021 Sales and Current Permitting Statistics," there were:

Shellfish Permits (as of March 2022) :

Shellfish: 32 issued

18 oyster, 14 clam

21 actively farming, 6 not farming, 5 not reported

Combination seaweed/shellfish: 26 issued

21 actively farming, 2 not farming, 3 not reported

Hatcheries: 4 active

2 land-based, 2 floating

Pacific Oysters :

4,607,191 oysters sold

5.3% decrease from 2020

Sold to public: 1,915,831

Sold to other farms: 2,688,246

Sold to other: 3,114

Nursery sales to farms: 1,500,000

Overall decrease likely due to reduced sales of juvenile oysters from hatcheries or nurseries

Farms reporting sales: 25

Commercial value: \$2,653,463

Source: alaskaseagrant.org/aquaculture

Local growers are all struggling to build their farms to meet the market demand after years of seed uncertainty and continue to struggle with significant increases in seed prices. The industry is still fragile but showing signs of recovery with stable production levels, and growers are improving their marketing and sales techniques increasing gross sales.

State support for our industry is still a fraction of a much larger budget, yet mariculture has excellent potential to contribute to and diversify Alaska's economy.