

RI aquaculture industry gets \$1.42 million boost from act of Congress

Maybe an act of Congress is all it takes to pull Rhode Island up from dead last place in U.S. aquaculture production. Behind even landlocked Nevada and North Dakota, Rhode Island generates only about \$300,000 a year through its aquaculture industry. But a Congressional appropriation seeks to boost the state's standing: The grant, generated through the efforts of U.S. Senator Jack Reed, directs \$1.42 million toward development, promotion, and management of a viable aquaculture presence in the Ocean State.

The Rhode Island Aquaculture Initiative is a unique collaboration that unites federal and state interests as well as academic, regulatory, and industry resources. Funding from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) is being awarded to the Rhode Island Coastal Resources Management Council (CRMC), the state's lead regulatory agency for aquaculture. CRMC, in turn, is enlisting Rhode Island Sea Grant, the University of Rhode Island (URI), and Roger Williams University (RWU) to administer the project.

"With the technical knowledge and investment in research by Sea Grant, URI, and Roger Williams, and with their close work with the fishing industry, Rhode Island has great potential to become a leader in the aquaculture industry in the Northeast," Reed says.

The aquaculture initiative addresses Coastal Zone Management Act recommendations that call for aquaculture planning as part of a comprehensive coastal zone management program, according to Grover Fugate, CRMC executive director. Until now, there has been no funding source attached to the recommendations. Reed's procurement of the NOAA grant assures that aquaculture is integrated into coastal planning, a development Fugate describes as "the most important thing that has happened to aquaculture in Rhode Island in 40 years."

"Because of the state's small size and the intensity of existing coastal resource uses, Rhode Island may never become a major producer in terms of quantity," acknowledges Barry Costa-Pierce, Rhode Island Sea Grant director. However, he says, the state can offer world-class talent in aquaculture to assert leadership and bolster the global industry with ecological, engineering, business development, and other manufacturing and support services.

The major components of the proposed program reflect both the university focus on research and technological development and the industry emphasis on application. A key element is support for applied research to address industry priorities, including cultivation of alternative species, development of monitoring and marketing innovations, evaluation of environmental and economic impacts, and enhancement of comprehensive ocean mapping efforts.

The ocean mapping aspect of the initiative continues an ongoing Geographical Information Systems (GIS) project at URI to map existing and potential aquaculture sites. Complementing this endeavor are proposed projects that will support a feasibility study for an aquaculture technology park and a

shellfish enhancement effort by RWU's Center for Economic and Environmental Development.

Consistent with the practical, shirtsleeves approach of the science component, the second critical element of the initiative is in-the-trenches outreach. This component focuses on creation of two extension positions, one specializing in finfish culture and the other in shellfish culture. The extension function will ensure integrated, statewide outreach to support the industry with technical assistance and training, demonstration projects, species diversification, and market development.

Addressing the multilateral nature of the project and the networking inherent in its implementation, URI President Robert L. Carothers points out that, "We have been doing the basic science in this field for many years, and this grant will help that insight and knowledge get dispersed throughout the state."

David Alves, CRMC aquaculture coordinator and chair of the aquaculture initiative's executive committee, states that the immediate goal "is to increase production and diversify the industry." Noting that Rhode Island's aquaculture production now depends almost entirely on two species—quahogs and oysters—Alves says the extension and research efforts will foster cultivation of new and nontraditional species, exploration of innovative culture methods, and recruitment of untapped producers.

Specific possibilities for "growing the industry" range from modification of familiar practices to experimentation with novel production techniques. Alves foresees both freshwater finfish culture and offshore cage culture. He anticipates partnerships with capture fisheries to exploit existing practices and infrastructure. And he envisions diversification by land farmers into culture enterprises similar to the Massachusetts project dedicating a nonproducing cranberry bog to aquaculture.

"We may never catch up to Connecticut's \$70 million aquaculture industry," says Alves of Rhode Island's aquaculture status. "But I do see us having a viable, healthy industry that can contribute to the state's bottom line."

—By *Tony Corey*

Links:

R.I. Coastal Resources Management Council <http://www.crmc.state.ri.us/>

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration <http://www.noaa.gov/>

University of Rhode Island <http://www.uri.edu/>

Roger Williams University <http://www.rwu.edu/>

