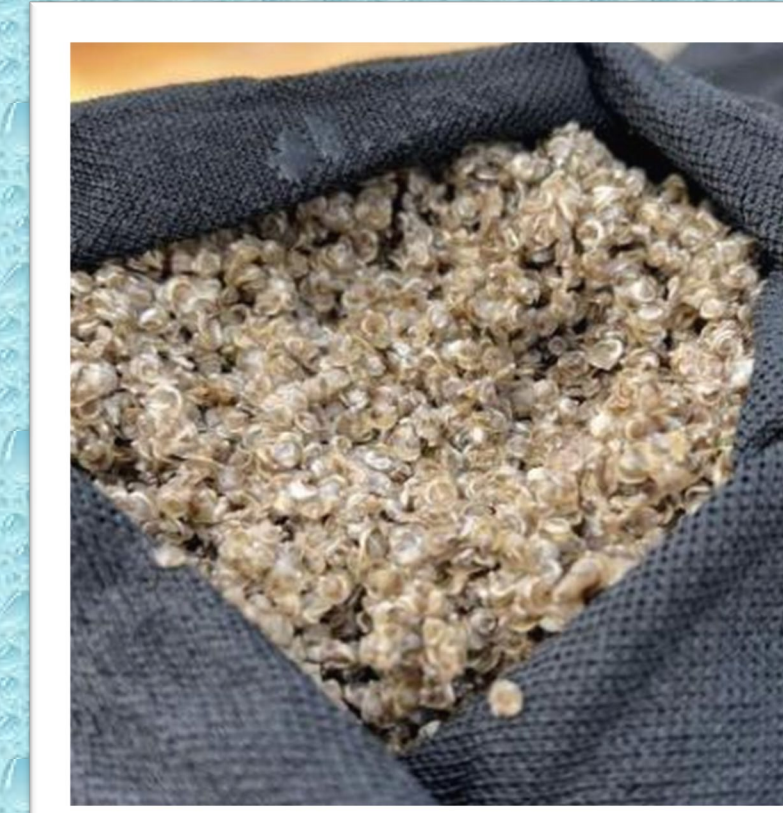


# Oyster Advocacy:

## Educating about local aquaculture

### *A Collaboration Between Virginia Cooperative Extension and Oyster Growers in Mathews County*

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#### Needs and Goals

Mathews County is a central hub of oyster production for Virginia's aquaculture industry. While boasting the most coastline of any county in Virginia and directly bordering the Chesapeake Bay, Mathews houses many aquaculture businesses. There is a clear need to teach local stakeholders in Mathews County about the importance of the oyster lifecycle, its effects on the environment and how to enjoy them, whether through consumption or growing them at home.

Aquaculture education helps bolster advocacy for the county's oyster producers and promotes careers in aquaculture. Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) partnered with Oyster Seed Holdings (OSH) and other private oyster production farms on Gwynn's Island to host numerous tours, educational video recordings, and aquaculture internships for STEM students. This educational programming, has increased the community's understanding of how Mathews' County oyster production has assisted in cleaning the Chesapeake Bay.



Aerial View of Gwynn's Island, VA in Mathews County

#### Introduction

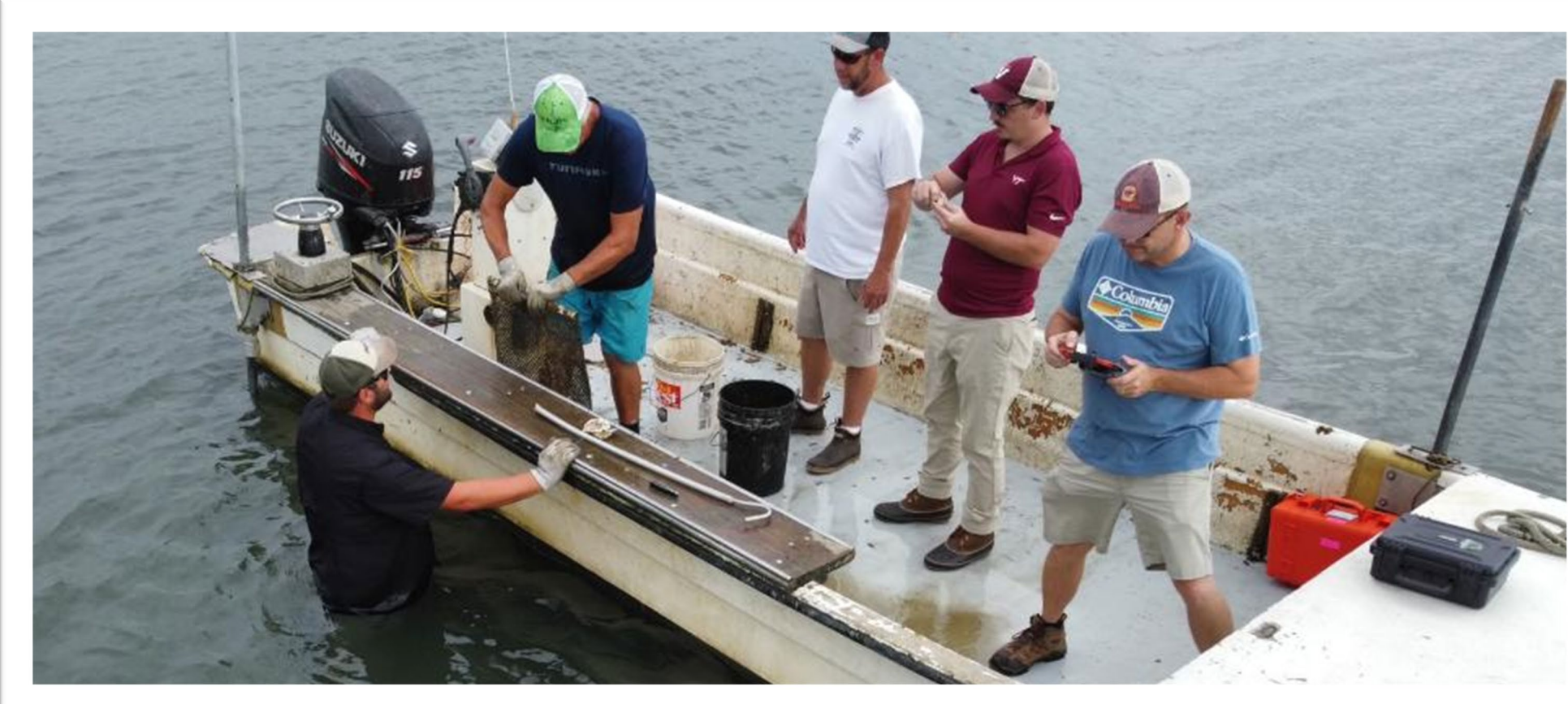
Discover the collaboration and innovation in oyster advocacy. Mathews Cooperative Extension's agriculture and natural resources agent and Mathews aquaculture businesses produced several educational opportunities for stakeholders and youth. Follow how the path of collaboration was developed and how the programming efforts have stemmed into a fruitful endeavor to promote aquaculture topics and job opportunities to the public.

#### Oyster Programming

The ANR agent visited OSH to inquire about educational opportunities within the county about hosting youth tours and other educational opportunities. From these on-site visits discussions led to the creation of numerous ideas and plans that could be made to bolster aquaculture education to the public. Establishing contact and clear communication led to OSH hosting 5 tours of their oyster hatchery for 4-H youth and Ag in the Classroom groups to learn about how oysters are grown and about potential aquaculture careers. Next stop was to 3 Hands Oyster Company to parallel the oyster lifecycle and partner with a local oyster farm. Rather than having a tour, the farmer and the agent decided to do host two video series covering the practice and procedures of the farm for stakeholders to view. VCE agents also took a tour of OSH and got to try their food truck's dishes to help them become advocates for Virginia aquaculture.

#### Promoting Clean Waterways

The agent worked with Tidewater Oyster Grower's Association (TOGA) to host programs for stakeholders to learn about how to grow their own oysters at home from seed to clean the water around their waterfront property. Properly teaching them how to handle, clean, and grade their oysters properly to promote cleaning up the Chesapeake Bay.



VCE Agents Frank Long and Mike Parrish working with 3 Hands Oyster Co. to record video on farming oysters in Milford Haven.

#### About Oyster Seed Holdings

OSH is an independent and innovative shellfish hatchery that embraces technology to advance their operations and the larger aquaculture industry, adopting a "tech forward" approach to support the "growing edge." They are a recognized leader in developing products and techniques to support oyster production growing seed for oyster producers, up and down the entire East Coast. Since their inception in 2008, they have been a trusted source of seed and expert advice to oyster growers, while also opening our doors to public tours that provide educational insight into the rarified world of shellfish hatchery production.



Top: OSH Employee Gretchen Davis teaches Compass Academy students about the oyster bottle system.  
Bottom: Gretchen Davis gives an interview for Desktop Farm Day.



#### Results

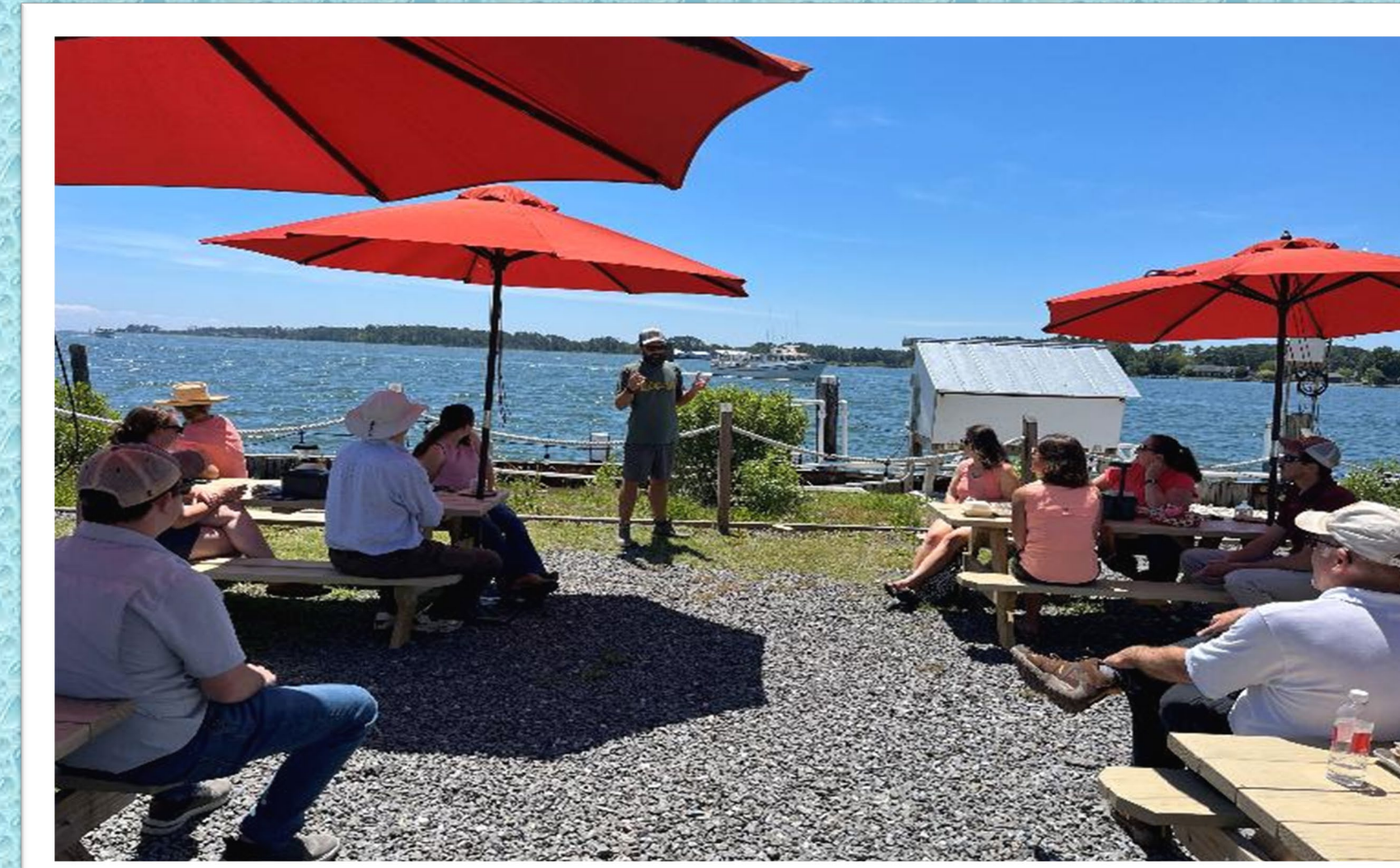
This impact has led to an increase in the knowledge of our local oyster growers and their businesses. Rather than maintaining a mysterious persona to the public, they are now staple members of the community and have a bustling following of locals that advocate on their behalf. Oyster Seed Holdings now has a food truck serving farm to table oysters and oyster dishes to the locals while providing their own tours. Stakeholders understand the importance of floating cages, PVC poles, and other oyster farm signs on the open water as actual farms. We have seen an increase in homeowners growing their own oysters off their waterfront property.

Evaluation Numbers:

- 71 youth have participated in oyster tours.
- 38 ANR agents have participated in aquaculture professional development tours in Mathews County.
- Desktop Farm Day Oyster Videos: 190+ views
- 88% of participants from the TOGA Home Oyster Grower's Workshop said they are comfortable growing oysters at home

"Oyster farming has opened me up to a new career path. I never thought about the idea of working on the water until now." – Mathews High School student

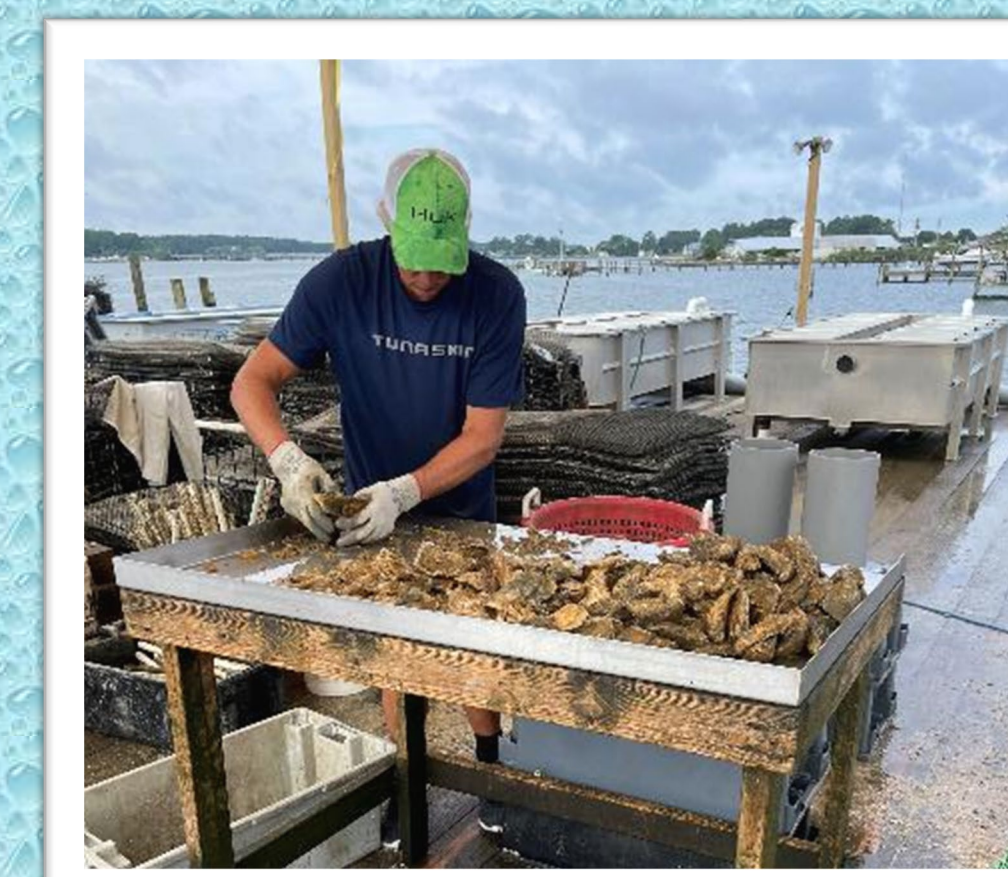
"It is important to share our local community's aquaculture industry to our youth in order to bring them back to the county to join the community." – Stan Grice, Mathews County resident



OSH Owner Michael Congrove gives VCE ANR Agents a tour of the hatchery.

#### Conclusion

Mathews Cooperative Extension is planning on continuing to hold educational tours to OSH to cover the hatchery process, continue advocating for new oyster growers locally and in the surrounding counties, and create new ways to highlight the oyster's importance to our community.



3 Hands Oyster Co. employee teaches how to grade oysters by hand for Desktop Farm Day.

#### Acknowledgments

This extension collaboration was supported by Virginia Cooperative Extension, Oyster Seed Holdings and private Mathews, Middlesex, and Gloucester aquaculture producers.