

2024 VIRGINIA OYSTER ANNUAL REPORT

In 2024, CBF continued restoring oysters to Virginia's rivers and the Chesapeake Bay with the help of 1,525 volunteers who contributed 38,000 hours of their time. We are so honored that people across the region give their time to support the native oyster.



CBF RELEASES OYSTER REPORT

In February, CBF released our latest report, *Hope on the Half Shell: Harnessing oysters to build ecological and community resilience*, which focuses on the power of the oyster and its pivotal role in the Bay clean-up effort. As the report shows, there's never been a more important time to focus on the oyster. With Chesapeake Bay oyster recovery at a crucial point, building on current momentum will increase resiliency to climate change while creating multiple benefits for people and the environment. You can read the full report at cbf.org/24oysterreport.

CBF AND LEGISLATORS LOVE OYSTERS

On Valentine's Day, CBF and the Chesapeake Oyster Alliance hosted our Oysters on Capitol Square event. Many legislators stopped by for a tasty treat while hearing from oyster farmers, including Walker's Seafood and Full Measure Oyster Company from the Eastern Shore, Steamboat Wharf Oyster Company from the Rappahannock River, Salty Bottom Blue Oysters from Gwynn's Island, Big Island Aquaculture from Hayes, and Lynnhaven Oyster Club from Virginia Beach. We were also pleased when Governor Youngkin showed up to visit with the oyster farmers and hear about how clean water supports their industry!



CBF EXPANDS WORK IN HAMPTON

CBF and its partners are working to restore 10 acres of oyster reefs in the Hampton River. In September, we received news that the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation awarded CBF a grant to bring one million baby oysters to two new sanctuary reefs in the river. This community-oriented project in the densely populated city will engage Hampton University students and other civic organizations and ensure that oysters, their reefs, and the fish that call these reefs home become more abundant in this urban waterway. CBF also is grateful to our many private donors and the Cabell Foundation for providing the funding to act as leverage to obtain the federal grant. CBF will begin reef construction in 2025.

CBF partnered with our friends at Hampton University's Department of Marine and Environmental Sciences to learn how to operate a HYCAT, which is an autonomous surface vehicle used for remote monitoring. The HYCAT will allow scientists to capture data about underwater terrain and water quality in real time and be used to conduct surveys to analyze conditions before and after our large-scale restoration in the Hampton River.

CBF was part of Shored Up's program to work with culinary students at the New Horizons Regional Education Center in Hampton. Shored Up, a business that fosters stewardship of our waterways through tours and educational experiences, leads the Culinary Oyster Vocational Experience (COVE), a "Bay-to-Plate" program for the culinary students. COVE is designed to educate aspiring chefs to appreciate oysters as a valuable, nutritious, all-season food—as well as an iconic species.

CBF thanks our local partners without whom we would be unable to be as successful as we are: City of Hampton, City of Norfolk, City of Portsmouth, City of Virginia Beach, Elizabeth River Project, Friends of the Rappahannock, Hampton University, James River Association, Nansemond Indian Nation, Nansemond River Preservation Alliance, The Nature Conservancy, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Virginia Institute of Marine Science, Virginia Marine Resources Commission, and the Watermen's Museum.

We are also grateful to our donors, including Amazon.com, Inc., Anonymous, Renee and Nick Bemish, Cabell Foundation, Norman Chalmers, CMA CGM, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, and Newport News Shipbuilding.



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Oyster Gardening Program Flourishes

cbf.org/vaostergardening

CBF's 2024 Oyster Gardening Program wrapped up in September with 627 gardeners participating in the program—the second highest on record. We hosted a total of 10 events from Irvington on the Northern Neck to Machipongo on the Eastern Shore. Approximately 108,379 adult oysters were returned and planted by CBF and our partners at The Tides Inn, Nansemond River Preservation Alliance, Elizabeth River Project, Friends of the Rappahannock, and the Virginia Institute of Marine Science. The oysters were planted on non-harvest reefs in the Lynnhaven, Lafayette, Hampton, Nansemond, Elizabeth, and Rappahannock Rivers. These planted oysters are now filtering up to 5.3 million gallons of water a day! We also added multiple new publicly accessible growing locations, bringing our total number to 24. Sixty-four families and groups are now able to be part of our oyster gardening program—the highest public gardener number on record!



Shell Recycling Program Expands

cbf.org/shellrecycling

During 2024, CBF recycled 2,395 bushels of oyster shells! We also welcomed five new restaurants to the shell recycling program, which gives us 46 participating businesses. Special thanks to the 55 volunteers who contributed 1,377 hours of their time to collect shells weekly from local restaurants. Additionally, CBF added one new recycling bin to our public shell recycling network at the Mary D. Pretlow Library in Norfolk, providing more opportunities for the public to save shells.



Lafayette Oysters Thriving

The oyster restoration reefs built in Norfolk's Lafayette River are thriving beyond expectations, with hundreds of oysters found growing per square meter on two of the three reefs. An oyster reef must have at least 50 oysters per square meter to ensure a healthy oyster reef and meet standards set by the Environmental Protection Agency's Chesapeake Bay Program. All three reefs surveyed by CBF surpassed those standards, with oyster densities ranging from 64 to 258 oysters per square meter. The reefs include oysters of various ages and sizes, proving that oysters are reproducing.

CBF Partners with Businesses

CBF and First Landing Seafood Company (FLSC) worked together to produce and deploy spat on shell on one of FLSC's leases in the Broad Bay area of the Lynnhaven River. CBF donated 300 shell bags and the use of our setting tanks to grow the spat on shell. FLSC then planted the baby oysters on shelled bottom between rows of oyster cages on their existing oyster lease. These oysters will eventually be harvested for commercial sale.

Oysters Part of Living Shoreline Projects

CBF and the City of Norfolk installed oyster castles at the Highland Park living shoreline in late August, moving 450 of the concrete structures in less than three hours. This project is part of a larger effort involving the Highland Park Civic League, Lafayette Wetlands Partnership, Norfolk Master Gardeners, and the Elizabeth River Project.



Oyster castles, designed to be modular, allow flexibility in a living shoreline's design, while providing habitat for many fish species as well as oysters, which prefer hard surfaces to latch on to and grow. Later in the year, our volunteers helped install a 158-foot living shoreline in Hampton at Bluebird Gap Farm. The volunteers installed manmade logs made of natural materials, 100 tons of sand, and hundreds of bushels of loose oyster shells, and planted 1,000 wetland plugs. Living shorelines are a natural approach to protecting tidal shorelines from erosion. Compared to hardened shorelines, living shorelines offer environmental benefits such as habitat to critters like nesting turtles, shorebirds, and blue crabs and property protection from the effects of sea-level rise and erosion.

Chesapeake Oyster Alliance Grows

chesapeakeoysteralliance.org

In fall 2024, the Chesapeake Oyster Alliance (COA) announced it recorded a new total of 6.51 billion oysters added to the Bay since 2017. COA's count aims to include all oysters directly added to the Bay and its tributaries through restoration and aquaculture. Oyster aquaculture operations in Virginia alone added another 119 million oysters to this total. These efforts have now surpassed the halfway mark to the group's goal to promote the addition of 10 billion oysters to the Bay by 2025. Notably, this update includes restoration work on the last of Maryland and Virginia's "10 Tributary Strategy" rivers, forecasting a remarkable accomplishment in the history of Bay restoration. CBF founded COA to bring back oysters from historically low levels and the alliance now boasts 113 partners.

York River Meets Restoration Goals

On Earth Day, CBF staff joined Governor Youngkin and other state officials to celebrate the Lower York River meeting its oyster restoration goals and becoming one of the six restored rivers for oysters in Virginia! In 2014, the Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement outlined a plan to restore the native oyster habitat and populations in 10 Chesapeake Bay tributaries by 2025. The Lower York River, as well as the Piankatank, Lafayette, Lynnhaven, Eastern Branch, and the Great Wicomico are the others that are considered restored or on their way to being so.

