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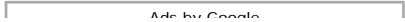
By Timothy B. Wheeler
April 7, 2009

Proposals to use a foreign species to restore the [Chesapeake Bay](#)'s depleted oyster population were essentially scrapped Monday as state and federal governments agreed to focus on bringing back the native oyster.

Maryland, Virginia and federal agencies announced that they remain "fully committed" to using only native oysters, even in trying to help rebuild the bay's seafood industry. Using non-native oysters poses "unacceptable ecological risks," officials said.

The decision ends years of debate about whether to introduce an Asian oyster into the bay and concludes nearly five years of formal study, costing \$17 million in state and federal funds.

The Ehrlich administration had pushed for seeding the Chesapeake with the fast-growing Asian oysters because they resist the diseases that have nearly wiped out the bay's native shellfish. Amid scientific fears that the alien species could create ecological havoc, the O'Malley administration abandoned that stance.

 In Virginia, though, the seafood industry sought to farm Asian oysters bred to be sterile. The state backed the industry through seven years of "field trials" in which businesses grew batches of the sterile shellfish in cages.

But the state relented in the face of widespread scientific concerns that, despite safeguards, some Asian oysters eventually would reproduce in the bay and their offspring would spread.

Yesterday's joint statement left open the possibility that small, carefully controlled studies might still be approved. But any research in open bay waters would require approval from all parties - unlikely, given firm opposition to such experiments by Maryland and federal environmental agencies.

The governments now plan to craft a strategy for replenishing oyster reefs and seeding them with native bivalves bred in hatcheries. Watermen, meanwhile, will be encouraged to try oyster farming.

But scientists caution that unless native oysters develop a resistance to the diseases killing them, replenishing the bay's wild population could be time-consuming and costly. Large-scale restoration could require spending as much as \$50 million a year over the next decade - 10 times what has been spent so far, officials estimate.

The federal government has committed \$6.6 million in the coming year, Maryland \$5 million and Virginia up to \$1 million. The two states are seeking \$24 more million in federal economic stimulus funds to apply to oyster restoration efforts.

"We cannot guarantee success, but we'll give it a helluva go," said Col. Dionysios Anninos of the [Norfolk](#) District of the Army Corps of Engineers, which has directed two reef restorations in Virginia, where native oysters appear to be thriving.

The decision was hailed by environmental groups, including the Nature Conservancy and the [Chesapeake Bay Foundation](#), which had threatened to sue if the governments authorized using non-native oysters.

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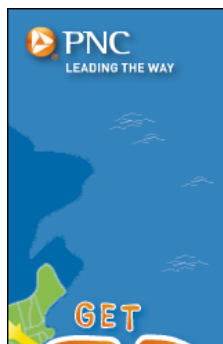
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