



United States Department of Agriculture  
Natural Resources Conservation Service

## Rhode Island State Office

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# NEWS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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## Rhode Island Aquaculture Producers Complete First Set in 2009 Oyster Restoration Project

WARWICK, RI (June 16, 2009) – On Tuesday, June 9, 2009, 13 aquaculture producers (oyster farmers) began the 2009 oyster restoration project funded through the Natural Resources Conservation Service's (NRCS) Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). The goal of the effort is to increase the native oyster population, provide essential oyster reef habitat to benefit a wide variety of aquatic organisms, and improve water quality.

This project is believed to be the first, large scale oyster restoration program in the U.S. that is totally industry based. Playing a pivotal role partnering with NRCS and other organizations, oyster farmers have adapted their expertise in growing market ready oysters to the oyster restoration project. The NRCS-funded oyster farmers grow, rear, and transplant oysters for three years using approved oyster seed on shell oyster setting techniques. The farmers are responsible for obtaining certified seed on shell oyster larvae, growing out juvenile oysters for five months on their farms, and transplanting the oysters to approved oyster habitat restoration sites throughout Narragansett Bay and the coastal ponds.

In 2008, the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) awarded \$792,000 to eight Rhode Island oyster farmers. This initial effort yielded approximately 2.5 million oysters which were transplanted to several restoration sites. For 2009, additional funding was sought by a total of 13 growers to produce approximately 24 million oysters over the next three years. This year alone, an estimated 8.9 million oysters will be grown for restoration effort. Last week, half of the participating farmers obtained 1,300 bags of oyster seed on shell from a hatchery in Dennis, MA where they were transported to their individual farms for the summer grow-out. A second set is scheduled for late June.

The farmers will grow out the juvenile oysters for approximately five months on their farms. From July through September, the oysters will be periodically observed to monitor growth. In the fall, site visits will be conducted at each grow-out location to calculate and measure the number of live, healthy oysters. On average, oysters are required to be 1 inch or larger before they can be transplanted to the final restoration sites which will occur from the fall into the winter.

RI NRCS worked in collaboration with leaders from the aquaculture industry, DEM, the University of Rhode Island, Coastal Resources Management Council, Roger Williams University, Ocean State Aquaculture Association, and The Nature Conservancy to develop an oyster restoration program modeled on successful citizen volunteer and academic oyster restoration programs along the Atlantic seaboard.

## History of Oysters in RI Waters

Oyster beds were historically prolific throughout RI estuarine waters, and most likely contributed to the productivity and diversity of marine and estuarine fish and wildlife species. However, few native oyster beds currently remain in RI to provide essential fish and wildlife habitat functions. In addition to serving as a high protein food source for migratory waterfowl and other marine organisms, the water filtering capacity of healthy and abundant oyster beds can improve water quality as well as water clarity.

Pictures of oyster restoration process



Oyster seed on shell bags in tank at hatchery .

Oyster seed on shell bags being transplanted from hatchery.



Producers unloading oyster seed bags from truck



Producers loading oyster seed bags on boats.



Producer departing dock in boat with oyster seed bags.



Producers in transit to oyster farm.



A view of an oyster farm located in local RI coastal pond.



A close up of oyster seed on shell



Photos of a producer making room at the oyster farm for oyster seed bags.



Oyster seed bags begin growth process at oyster farm.



Oyster seed on shell after 2-3 months of growth.