

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: Tilghman aquaculture incubator will become national model

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Beginning in Fall 2018, an innovative oyster aquaculture incubator at Phillips Wharf Environmental Center on Tilghman Island will serve as a national model for traditional working waterfront communities seeking to strengthen the local economy. With support from a \$95,000 grant from the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission, funded by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), this new incubator will build an industry workforce on Maryland's Eastern Shore using hands-on training on the Phillips Wharf oyster farm to teach watermen how to add aquaculture revenues to their existing businesses or transition to aquaculture entirely.

Phillips Wharf is one of seven organizations nationwide chosen out of 65 applicants for this highly competitive grant support.

To meet growing demand for seafood, aquaculture technology is making possible increased food production, restored habitat and replenished wild stocks, and rebuilt populations of threatened and endangered species. By providing a pathway for traditional seafood harvesters to move into aquaculture, the ASMFC grant will support infrastructure upgrades to Phillips Wharf oyster farm for training generations of future aquaculture practitioners. Phillips Wharf will serve as a regional incubator where watermen can learn the technical and business elements of surface, cage and bottom shellfish culture and transition into a viable, sustainable and environmentally green industry. This new program will improve the ecosystem through additional filtration and nitrogen removal while helping the region's existing watermen bring direct economic returns to their coastal communities.

"We are delighted to receive this prestigious grant," Phillips Wharf Environmental Center Executive Director Kelley Cox said. "Recognizing that the community of Tilghman Island, like many others, is slowly losing its native population and maritime culture, we sought this funding to help watermen meet the increasing challenge of earning a reasonable living without harming the complex ecosystem in which they work."

Given the complexities of federal grants, in order to start the project, Phillips Wharf must raise \$95,000 in unrestricted funds by the end of August to start the project. "We hope our friends will recognize the value of this program and join us by providing financial support to meet this challenge," added Cox, a biologist whose family can be traced in Eastern Shore history to the 1600s.

Participants will be recruited through county oyster committees, local and state watermen's associations and by seafood dealers. Once graduated from the program, participants can continue to use Phillips Wharf's equipment at a reduced cost until they can purchase their own. Phillips Wharf is also prepared to purchase oysters for resale from program graduates, reducing the marketing and sales efforts needed for participants' start-up operations.

Additional support may include sub-leasing space from the Phillips Wharf oyster farm, and Phillips Wharf will also work with some students to help them connect with job opportunities if they choose not to start their own aquaculture business.

Phillips Wharf was founded on Tilghman Island in 2006. A traditional fishing community located at the tip of a 20-mile peninsula reaching out into the center of the Chesapeake Bay from Maryland's Eastern Shore, like other traditional fishing villages across the Atlantic seaboard, Tilghman Island faces pressure from diminishing seafood stocks, development, and loss of fishing industry jobs. The median income for a family on Tilghman Island in 2010 was \$38,304 compared to the Maryland average of \$68,854 (US Census.)

In 2014, Phillips Wharf purchased "the Oyster House" – a historic property at Knapp's Narrows that has been a focal point for the seafood industry for over a century and is part of the island's maritime heritage on the island's working waterfront. Now part of Phillips Wharf, the Oyster House is an economic driver on Tilghman Island, encouraging tourism, supporting the working waterfront and educating residents and visitors about protecting the health of the Chesapeake Bay. Just last year with donor support, Phillips Wharf purchased an existing oyster farm consisting of five acres of leased bottom in the Choptank River with oysters ready to harvest, an on-site nursery adequate to grow out oyster larvae to supply the farm and to sell, two boats, and a facility for post-harvest cleaning, grading, washing and packaging with refrigeration for aggregation. This revenue generating operation will sustain Phillips Wharf's youth education programs. An additional 10 acres pending approval in nearby Harris Creek (a tributary of the Choptank River) will triple the size of Phillips Wharf's oyster operation and support even more future Aquaculturists-in-training. By siting the aquaculture farms in the Harris Creek restoration sanctuary, watermen can reap immediate economic gains from an area designed to provide benefits over a longer time horizon. The oyster sanctuaries are designed in such a way as to export larvae to other areas in the Bay to support wild harvest.

Phillips Wharf is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization offering hands-on education for children and adults, a "Fishmobile" marine science outreach program that reaches tens of thousands of children in Maryland, Delaware and Virginia each year, a citizen-based oyster restoration program and most recently, an aquaculture training program designed to help working watermen incorporate sustainable aquaculture practices to supplement their traditional wild seafood harvest operations.



Figure 1 Aquaculture Trainee Stacy Helgason heading out to the oyster farm

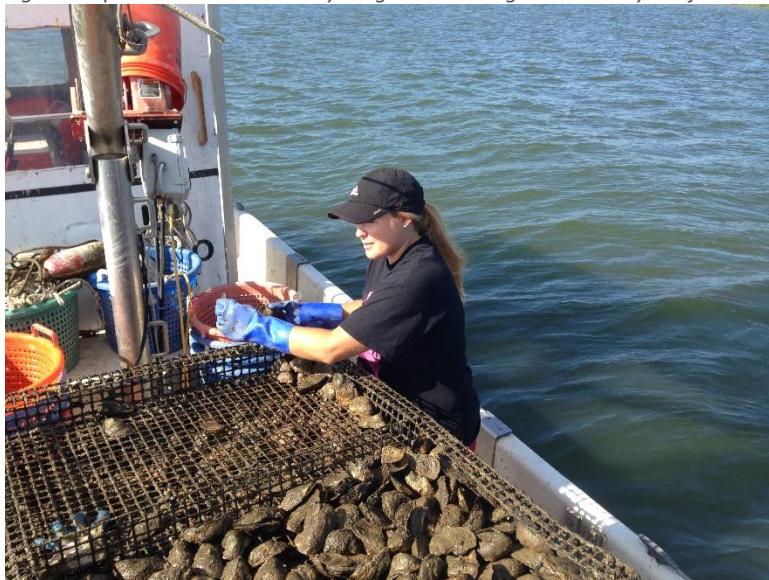


Figure 2 Aquaculture trainee Stacy Helgason sorting oysters on the farm