A BLUEPRINT FOR OYSTER AQUACULTURE IN GEORGIA

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Georgia is launching a new industry in aquaculture, cultivating oysters for the lucrative half-shell market. Na–tionally, consumer demand for high-quality, raw-bar-grade oysters is rising. At the same time, the regions tradition–ally sourcing this product have experienced a decline in supply, resulting in an increase in price and profit margin. This has created a prime opportunity for Georgia to enter the aquaculture market. The University of Georgia, Georgia Department of Natural Resources and Georgia Department of Agriculture are partnering to expand the Georgia aquaculture industry, with the goal of gaining enough growers to sustain a pri–vate, commercial oyster hatchery. By working together and leveraging resources, this part–nership seeks to follow the example of Virginia, who has shown what state investment in the single oyster market can produce. In just 10 years, Virginia expanded their oyster harvest value from $196,125 in 2004 to $27.96 million in 2014. We have developed a blueprint for Georgia Oyster Aquaculture that outlines critical needs to grow the industry from its current state of 10 permitted growers to 50 in the next 5 years. Using both state and federal investment, the University of Georgia Oyster Hatchery opened in 2015 at the UGA Shellfish Research Laboratory on Skidaway Island, Georgia. At full capacity, the hatchery will produce 15 million oyster spat with an estimated harvest value of $3- 5.25 million. Additional investment in oyster research, training for shell–fish growers, resource management and consumer safety is needed to sustain continued growth and realize the goals and actions outlined in this collaborative Blueprint for Georgia Oyster Aquaculture. In addition to the impacts on economic development, it is expected that expansion in this industry will lead to water quality improvements through education and restoration.

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