

Louisiana Oyster Task Force Meeting
Mitch Jurisich, Chairman
Wednesday, August 19, 2026, 10:00 a.m.
New Orleans Lakefront Airport
6001 Stars and Stripes Blvd.
New Orleans, LA 70126

I. Pledge of Allegiance

II. Roll Call and Introduction of Guests

Voting Members Present

Brandt Lafrance
Jakov Jurisic
Mitch Jurisich
Jody Johnson
Al Sunseri
Brad Robin
Peter Vujnovich

Voting Members Absent

Brandon Lee Debarge
Willie Daisy
Matthew Slavich
Steve Pollock
Percy Dardar
Shane Bagala

Nonvoting Members Present

Bryan Wallace
Kyle Balkum
Robert Caballero
Mike Garrity
Gene Cavalier

Nonvoting Members Absent

Brian Lezina

III. Approval of May 20, 2026 Meeting Minutes and the August 19, 2026 Agenda

The May 20, 2026 meeting minutes were presented for approval. A motion to approve the minutes was made by Peter Vujnovich and seconded by Brad Robin. The motion carried with no opposition.

The Task Force then considered the August 19, 2026 meeting agenda. It was announced that New Business, Item I, regarding the Oyster Damage and Evaluation Board Process, would be deferred.

A motion to approve the amended agenda was made by Peter Vujnovich and seconded by Al Sunseri. The motion carried with no opposition.

IV. Treasury Report

A. LOTF Financial Report & Oyster Tag Sales

The Task Force received the Fiscal Year 2026 financial report and oyster tag sales update. The total Fiscal Year 2026 budget was reported as \$191,989, with a remaining balance of approximately \$66,585.

A member asked whether Eric Sunstorm's contract was up for renewal. It was explained that the contract was not currently up for renewal and that his contract renewal is generally addressed at the beginning of the year.

A motion to approve the Treasury Report was made by Peter Vujnovich and seconded by Brad Robin. The motion carried.

V. Committee Reports

A. Public and Private Oyster Grounds Committee (Mitch Jurisich)

B. Enforcement (Captain Joey Thompson)

Mike Garrity provided an enforcement report was provided covering oyster-related enforcement activity from May 1 through August 10, 2026.

In Region 4, which includes Iberia Parish, two sanitation code violations involving vessel sanitation requirements were reported.

In Region 5, which includes Calcasieu and Cameron parishes, two sanitation code violations involving logbook requirements and three sanitation code violations involving refrigeration requirements were reported. A total of 68 sacks were seized.

In Region 6, which includes Terrebonne, Lafourche, Grand Isle, and St. Mary, two sanitation code violations involving refrigeration requirements were reported. One violation was also reported for taking more than the two-sack daily recreational limit using illegal gear in an unauthorized harvest area. A total of 17.5 sacks of oysters were seized.

In Region 8, which includes Jefferson, Plaquemines, St. Bernard, Orleans, and St. Charles parishes, the reported violations included activity in Plaquemines and St. Bernard parishes.

In Plaquemines Parish, two citations were issued for violating the sanitation code. One citation was issued for taking oysters from an unapproved or polluted area, one citation was issued for taking commercial fish without a commercial license, and one citation was issued for taking commercial fish without a commercial gear license.

In St. Bernard Parish, four citations were issued for sanitation code violations involving refrigeration requirements. Two citations were issued for taking commercial fish without commercial licenses, one citation was issued for a miscellaneous sanitation code violation, and one citation was issued for taking oysters without a commercial gear license.

A total of 263 sacks and approximately 120 pounds of oysters from AOC-type cages were seized.

During discussion, a member asked about the reported violations in Calcasieu because the season was currently closed. It was explained that the enforcement report covered activity occurring from May 1 through August 10 and the violations occurred while the season was open.

A question was also raised regarding the approximately 120 pounds of oysters seized from AOC-type cages. It was explained that the seizure resulted from a covert operation.

C. Legislative (Brad Robin) – No report

D. Legal (Brad Robin/Jakov Jurisic) – No report

E. Research (Earl Melancon) – No report

F. Coastal Restoration (Capt. George Ricks)

Captain George Ricks provided an update on a recent diversion workshop. He explained that the workshop included several presentations and discussion regarding the operation and impacts of freshwater diversions.

During the workshop, a question was raised regarding whether the East Bank diversions and cuts were causing the saltwater wedge to increase. According to the discussion, the diversions and cuts were identified as a significant contributing factor.

Discussion then focused on the Caernarvon Diversion. Members noted concerns that the current salinity-based operating criteria for the diversion could potentially be changed. It was explained that the Caernarvon Diversion currently operates based on maintaining approximately five parts per thousand salinity at a designated monitoring location.

Members discussed the importance of maintaining the existing salinity-based operating regime. Concerns were raised that future recommendations regarding diversion operations could change the criteria currently used to operate the project.

Al Sunseri made a motion to prepare a letter supporting the continued use of a salinity-based operating regime for the Caernarvon Diversion. Jakov Jurisic seconded the motion.

Discussion followed regarding the appropriate recipients for the letter. Members discussed sending the letter to the technical working group, the appropriate advisory committee, and the Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority. It was explained that the technical working group develops recommendations regarding diversion operations and adjustments to operating plans, while the advisory committee reviews those recommendations.

Sunseri commented that the letter should also reference the historical background of the project, including its original authorization and operating requirements. Members stated the current regime was created in union with the oyster industry to be a salinity-based operating regime.

Members also discussed the differences between the Caernarvon and Davis Pond diversions and noted that the projects operate differently depending on river stages, rainfall, and other environmental conditions.

Discussion then turned to ongoing concerns regarding river crevasses. Members discussed possible future actions, including the potential construction of an additional controlled structure. It was noted that there has been opposition to completely closing certain openings, although previous engineering plans had included potential closure and restoration work.

Members also discussed the continued costs associated with dredging and maintaining navigation channels and the impacts of changes in river flow.

The motion to prepare and send a letter supporting continued salinity-based operations for the Caernarvon Diversion was called for a vote and carried.

G. Marketing (BMF)

It was reported that arrangements for the upcoming events, including Louisiana Live and the "Let the World Be Your Oyster" event, were continuing and that additional details regarding sponsorships and promotional activities were still being finalized.

H. Health (LDH)

The Task Force discussed matters related to the Interstate Shellfish Sanitation Conference (ISSC), current shellfish sanitation requirements, and concerns regarding oyster refrigeration and product quality.

Members discussed the upcoming ISSC conference, which is scheduled for January 24 through January 29, 2027, in Rhode Island. Concerns were raised regarding the timing of conferences and the difficulty Louisiana industry members experience attending meetings that occur at the beginning of or during the middle of the oyster season.

It was explained that the ISSC Board establishes the conference schedule and that an October conference had previously been considered but could not be finalized because of venue availability. Members agreed that Louisiana should continue advocating for future conference dates that do not conflict with the oyster season.

The discussion then turned to current oyster refrigeration requirements and the industry's experiences with changes in refrigeration and handling practices over the years. Several members shared anecdotes about how oysters were historically handled and refrigerated before the current requirements were implemented.

Members recalled that, under previous practices, oysters were not always subjected to the same rapid cooling requirements currently in place. Some members expressed the belief, based on their experiences in the industry, that oysters were historically allowed to cool more gradually and that this process resulted in a better-quality product and, in some cases, improved shelf life.

Members discussed their experiences with oysters under the current refrigeration requirements and expressed concerns that rapid refrigeration may affect the condition of the oyster and reduce its shelf life once it reaches markets outside Louisiana. It was noted that oysters shipped to distant markets may arrive with a shorter remaining shelf life, potentially resulting in increased product loss for dealers and restaurants and affecting customer relationships and repeat sales.

Members also discussed the need for additional scientific research to determine whether there is a measurable difference between historical handling practices and the current refrigeration requirements. The discussion focused on whether different cooling methods or rates of refrigeration could affect oyster quality and shelf life while continuing to meet necessary food safety requirements.

The possibility of a future collaboration with LSU Food Science was discussed. Members noted that LSU had previously conducted research related to oyster handling and refrigeration and suggested that the Task Force could potentially work with LSU Food Science or another appropriate research program to revisit or expand upon that research.

Potential future research could examine the effects of different cooling methods and rates of refrigeration on oyster quality, shelf life, and *Vibrio vulnificus*. Members discussed the possibility of comparing historical handling practices with current refrigeration methods to determine whether alternative cooling practices could maintain food safety standards while improving the overall quality and marketability of Louisiana oysters.

Members expressed interest in pursuing additional conversations with LSU Food Science and other researchers to determine whether a future research collaboration could be developed.

I. Aquaculture (Steve Pollock) – No report

J. Joint Task Force Working Group (Mitch Jurisich) – No report

VI. New Business

A. To Hear the 2026 Oyster Stock Assessment Results and Consider the 2026/27 Oyster Season Recommendations – LDWF

Robert Caballero with LDWF presented the preliminary results of the 2026 Oyster Stock Assessment and the Department's proposed recommendations for the 2026/2027 oyster season. He noted that all data presented were preliminary and subject to change.

Caballero explained that, statewide, seed oysters decreased by 3.3 percent, while market-sized oysters increased by 106.6 percent. Overall, the total oyster resource increased by 44.5 percent compared to 2025.

He reviewed the results for each coastal study area and discussed where resources were available for market harvest and bedding. Discussion focused on several areas, including Lake Fortuna, Hackberry Bay, Sister Lake, Bay Junop, Lake Mechant, the Vermilion and Atchafalaya basins, and Calcasieu Lake.

The Task Force then discussed LDWF's proposed 2026/2027 season recommendations. Members had questions about several of the proposed openings, particularly the timing of the Sister Lake season. Caballero explained that LDH closure lines could affect how much of the area would be available later in the season. Members also discussed oyster quality and whether delaying the opening would allow the oysters additional time to grow.

The Task Force first discussed increasing the daily sack limit to help offset fuel and operating costs for harvesters traveling longer distances. **Brad Robin made a motion to recommend a 40-sack daily limit and allow possession of up to 80 sacks over two days. The motion was seconded by Al Sunseri and carried.**

The Task Force then discussed the proposed Sister Lake opening. Members discussed the timing of the season, including concerns regarding LDH closure lines and the potential benefits of allowing the oysters additional time to grow.

Al Sunseri made a motion to move the Sister Lake opening from October to March. The motion included a 19-day season and a 40-sack daily limit. Brad Robin seconded the motion, and the motion carried.

Additional discussion was held regarding Morgan Harbor, Little Lake, and Barataria, including potential bedding and harvest opportunities.

Peter Vujnovich made a motion to accept the remainder of LDWF's proposed 2026/2027 oyster season recommendations, as amended by the Task Force. Jakov Jurisic seconded the motion, and the motion carried.

B. To Hear an Update on the 2020/2021 Hurricane Disaster Grant Funding – LDWF
Sonya Self, Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, provided an update on the 2020/2021 Hurricane Disaster Grant programs.

She explained that Louisiana received approximately \$27.1 million between the Hurricane Laura and Hurricane Ida disaster programs. Approximately \$19.7 million was associated with Hurricane Laura, and approximately \$7.1 million was associated with Hurricane Ida.

LDWF submitted its spending plan to NOAA after receiving the funding allocation and recently received preliminary approval of the plan.

Under the current spending plan, \$100,000 is designated for seafood testing and enforcement by LDWF and the Louisiana Department of Health. Ten percent of the funding is designated for administration, with the remaining approximately \$24 million designated for direct payments to eligible industry participants.

Self explained that eligibility will be based on existing trip ticket and licensing information. The program is limited to saltwater fisheries and will include several industry sectors, including commercial fishermen, vessel owners, seafood dealers, wholesale dealers, and seafood processors.

Payments will be calculated using three components: a base payment, a loss payment, and a revenue payment.

Seafood processors will have a separate application process because processors may not have trip ticket information. Self explained that processors will be required to provide documentation demonstrating their eligibility, including applicable revenue and other financial information.

Eligible applicants will receive an initial notification explaining their eligibility, estimated award amount, and the information used to calculate the award. The online application will include pre-populated trip ticket and licensing information that applicants will be able to review and verify. Applicants will have the opportunity to accept the predetermined award, request additional information and appeal the award amount, or decline the award.

Jakov Jurisic expressed concerns regarding the transparency of the appeals process based on previous experiences with disaster assistance programs. The member explained that previous appeals had been denied without a written explanation or clear information regarding how the appeal was reviewed. Jurisic emphasized that the concern was not necessarily with the ability to submit documentation but with the lack of transparency surrounding the actual review process.

Self explained that applicants will be able to submit supporting documentation through the application portal and request additional information. She also stated that appeals may be reviewed by the LDWF Secretary and, in some circumstances, LDWF Legal. Jurisic requested that the Department provide a transparent process that clearly identifies how appeals are handled and gives applicants a meaningful opportunity to explain their position.

The anticipated grant start date is October 1, 2026, pending final NOAA approval. The application portal will not open before October 1 and will open once the final federal grant award is received.

Information regarding the program will be distributed through direct notices, LDWF's website, news releases, social media, and other communications. Self also emphasized that the program is not first-come, first-served because eligible applicants and payment amounts are predetermined.

C. To Consider Funding for the 2027 Louisiana Live Event in Washington, DC. – OTF
The Task Force discussed funding for the 2027 Louisiana Live event in Washington, D.C.
The sponsorship cost was reported as \$17,500

A motion to approve funding for the \$17,500 sponsorship was made by Jakov Jurisic and seconded by Peter Vujnovich. The motion carried.

D. To Consider Funding for a 2026/2027 Beuerman Miller Fitzgerald (BMF) PR Contract – OTF
The Task Force considered approval of the 2026/2027 Beuerman Miller Fitzgerald public relations contract.

Members discussed the total contract amount and clarified that the proposed amount included the regular contract as well as an amendment associated with the "Let the World Be Your Oyster" event.

The regular contract was reported as approximately \$50,000, with an additional approximately \$28,000 associated with the event, for a total of \$78,000.

A motion was made by Jakov Jurisic and seconded by Peter Vujnovich to approve the contract and associated amendment. The motion carried.

E. To Hear an Update from the Seafood Safety Taskforce- LDAF
Gene Cavalier provided an update on recent seafood safety legislation and activities involving the Louisiana Department of Agriculture and Forestry.

He discussed House Bill 121, which allows LDAF to seize and destroy affected seafood following a positive test without first having to request action from the Louisiana Department of Health. He explained that this allows the Department to act more quickly and reduces the possibility of affected product remaining in or returning to commerce.

Cavalier also discussed House Bill 588, which expanded representation on the Seafood Safety Task Force to include additional seafood industries, including oysters, finfish, and crab. The next Seafood Safety Task Force meeting was announced for September 14, 2026, at 10:00 a.m. in Baton Rouge.

Cavalier provided an update on a recent Certified Louisiana campaign promoting Louisiana shrimp. Approximately \$125,000 was spent on a three-week campaign that included radio advertisements, digital billboards, and other promotional efforts. He explained that the campaign was part of a broader effort to promote Louisiana wild-caught seafood and help consumers identify and distinguish Louisiana products from imported seafood.

Members discussed the campaign and whether similar efforts could be used to promote other Louisiana seafood products, including oysters. The discussion focused on whether the Certified Louisiana brand could help increase consumer awareness and make Louisiana oysters more recognizable in the marketplace.

Cavalier also discussed the newly established USDA Office of Seafood. He explained that the office was still new and that LDAF was waiting for more information about its mission and what opportunities may be available. These opportunities could potentially include grants, infrastructure assistance, marketing, and other resources for the seafood industry.

Cavalier also discussed LDAF's collaboration with the U.S. Food and Drug Administration regarding seafood safety and enforcement. The discussion focused on the testing and handling of imported

seafood and the coordination between state and federal agencies when products test positive for prohibited substances or otherwise fail to meet safety standards.

Members discussed what happens when a positive test result is received and the importance of coordinating with the FDA, particularly when a product may be involved in interstate commerce. The agencies share information and work together to determine the appropriate response when potentially unsafe seafood is identified.

Cavalier noted that this collaboration can include inspections, testing, compliance activities, and follow-up actions involving seafood products. The discussion emphasized the importance of having clear procedures in place for addressing positive test results and making sure products that do not meet requirements are removed from commerce.

The Task Force then discussed appointing a representative to participate in the Seafood Safety Task Force. Because the appointment was not listed as a separate agenda item, members discussed whether a formal vote was necessary. Chairman Mitch Jurisich appointed Brad Robin as the Task Force's representative, as he had previously expressed interest in participating.

F. To Hear a Presentation on Market Information and the Importance of Testing for Imports –
David Williams, SeaD Consulting

David Williams with SeaD Consulting provided an update on the current oyster market and the growing presence of imported oyster products.

Williams discussed the increase in imported oyster products, including breaded oysters, frozen oyster meat, and half-shell oysters. He noted that imported products, primarily from China and South Korea, are becoming more common in the marketplace and can affect sales of domestic products. He also discussed concerns about consumers not always knowing where the seafood they are purchasing originated.

Williams then discussed the development of a testing method that could help identify the origin of oyster products. The proposed test would use differences in DNA to distinguish imported oysters from Gulf oysters and could potentially be used to determine whether seafood being sold as domestic product was actually imported. He explained that the test would need to work on fresh, frozen, and cooked products to be useful for testing products sold in restaurants and retail locations.

The initial cost to develop and validate the test was estimated at approximately \$30,000, which Williams offered to reduce to \$20,000. He explained that after the initial investment, the program would require additional month-to-month funding to conduct testing in selected markets. This would include going into a market, testing products, sharing the results, and using the findings to generate media coverage and support additional enforcement or legislative efforts.

Williams referenced the existing shrimp testing program as an example and stated that the program costs approximately \$17,500 per month, with a minimum commitment of three months. He noted that the ongoing cost covers the testing and related efforts to publicize the results and build support for potential legislative or enforcement action.

Members discussed how the testing could potentially be used to identify mislabeled seafood products and support enforcement efforts, including testing seafood sold in restaurants and retail locations. The Task Force also discussed possible outside funding sources and whether other oyster-producing states or industry groups could help support the project. Potential funding or partnerships through the

Seafood Safety Task Force, the Louisiana Seafood Promotion and Marketing Board, and other organizations were also discussed.

After discussion, the Task Force agreed that it did not have enough available funding to move forward with the project at that time. Members decided to explore outside funding and potential partnerships before making a commitment to the testing program.

G. To Hear a Presentation on the Dredging of the Barataria Waterway – Brent Duet, Coastal Engineering Solutions

Agenda item was deferred until future meeting.

H. To Discuss and Consider Funding for Interstate Shellfish Sanitation Conference (ISSC) Membership Dues and Conference Expenses – OTF

The Task Force discussed funding ISSC membership dues, conference expenses, and travel for members attending the upcoming conference. Members noted that the Task Force has supported participation in the ISSC for many years and has historically covered membership, conference fees, and travel expenses.

Al Sunseri discussed the cost of membership and asked whether the Task Force should cover membership dues for its members. He noted that he maintains his own ISSC membership and that, as far as he knew, no other current Oyster Task Force members were listed as members. He also noted that membership provides access to information and resources, including recall information and other updates.

Mitch Jurisich asked whether it would be beneficial to provide memberships for all voting members so they would have access to the ISSC website and its resources.

Sunseri also raised concerns about traveling to conferences during the winter, based on his experiences being delayed and stranded for several days because of flight cancellations and weather-related issues. He asked LDWF to look into whether train travel from New Orleans to Rhode Island could be used as an alternative to flying. Members discussed that train travel would take longer but could provide a more predictable option during the winter.

Jakov Jurisic made a motion to approve ISSC membership dues, conference expenses, and travel. Pete Vujnovich seconded the motion, and the motion carried.

I. To Discuss the Oyster Damage and Evaluation Board Process- OTF

Agenda item was deferred until future meeting.

VII. Public Comment

No public comment.

VIII. Set Next Meeting

The next meeting was scheduled for September 29, 2026 at 9:30 am.

IX. Adjourn

Jakov Jurisic made the motion to adjourn. The motion was seconded by Al Sunseri. Motion carried.