

Joann M. McDermon, Mayor
Tom Leonard, Mayor Pro Tem

Aldermen:
Mike Benson
Richard Grant
Connie Pletl
Laura Olszewski



Alice Derian, ICMA-CM
Town Manager

Nancy Avery
Interim Town Clerk

April 2, 2025

To: North Carolina Division of Marine Fisheries

From: Joann McDermon, Mayor, Town of North Topsail Beach

Subject: Onslow County Shellfish Lease Hearing

On behalf of the Town of North Topsail Beach and the Board of Aldermen, I am writing to express our concerns regarding the greatly increasing number of shellfish leases (6) being considered for the waters surrounding North Topsail Beach. While we understand the economic benefits that shellfish farming brings to North Carolina, we must also consider the growing conflicts between these operations and our local recreational and commercial activities, as well as the potential for overproduction.

Our town is blessed with natural resources that draw residents and tourists alike, including pristine waters ideal for both recreation and commercial fishing. However, the expansion of shellfish leases has begun to encroach upon these valuable areas, creating conflicts that impact our community's way of life and local economy.

Recreational users, such as boaters and anglers, are finding it increasingly difficult to access waters that have been traditionally open to the public. Commercial fishermen, who have long relied on these waters, are also facing challenges as more areas become restricted due to shellfish farming operations. Additionally, we cannot at this stage rule out that the rapid growth of shellfish farming could lead to overproduction, which might have unintended ecological and economic consequences. Consequently, the Town has submitted objections to all applications for shellfish leases in the Town's jurisdiction.

Given these challenges, we respectfully request that you consider establishing a moratorium on new shellfish leases in our region. A temporary pause would allow us to evaluate the current situation, develop comprehensive management strategies, and ensure that future growth in the shellfish industry is balanced with the needs of our community and the environment.

As another justification for a pause, we are aware of a coordinated effort by the North Carolina Coastal Federation and Dr. Jane Harrison at the NC State Sea Grant program for a grant from NOAA. Their work would help to mitigate conflict that would include focus groups to identify areas of overlap. A resource use agreement would then serve as a guide to DMF for future leases. Thus, this resource use guide would help to resolve the conflict between the shellfish industry and public access to public waters.

We are aware that the County Commissioners in both Pender and Onslow counties as well as Town Councils in Surf City and Topsail Beach also have expressed concern and asked for a pause in new leases behind Topsail Island.