

New \$2.45M oyster hatchery, research center breaks ground in South Kingstown

By
Sam Wood

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04/12/2023



U.S. SEN. JACK REED, D-R.I., right, speaks during a groundbreaking ceremony for the Matunuck Shellfish Hatchery and Research Center in South Kingstown. From left is Robert Rheault, executive director for the East Coast Shellfish Growers Association; Perry Raso, owner of the Matunuck Oyster Bar; University of Rhode Island Professor Marta Gomez-Chiarri./ COURTESY SEN. JACK REED'S OFFICE

SOUTH KINGSTOWN – On a spit of land adjacent to the Matunuck Marina, a construction crew broke ground Tuesday for a new \$2.45 million shellfish hatchery and research center.

The project is expected to greatly expand the state's "blue economy" while increasing seafood production in southern New England.

The hatchery was born of a partnership of the University of Rhode Island and Perry Raso, owner of the Matunuck Oyster Bar and Oyster Farm.

The new center will focus on developing "boutique oysters" that are faster growing, better adapted to local environmental conditions and resistant to disease, said Marta Gomez-Chiarri, professor of aquaculture and fisheries at URI.

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"There is a lot of potential for sustainable growth," Gomez-Chiarri said. "Until now, there's been a serious bottleneck. Rhode Island hatcheries have had trouble buying enough oyster seed to satisfy demand."

Gomez-Chiarri said that the state-of-the-art Matunuck Shellfish Hatchery and Research Center will supply a more consistent and reliable supply of oyster seed for farmers throughout southern New England. Currently, farmers get their seed from Maine and Virginia "and sometimes they can't get enough," she said.

Rhode Island farmers will see a direct economic benefit, Gomez-Chiarri said. That's because oyster seed entering Rhode Island from out of state must be extensively tested for pathogens. If the seed is produced within the Ocean State, "then they don't need all of the certifications and it should be much cheaper for farmers," she said.

The 4,120-square-foot facility will house about 20 URI researchers, faculty and administrators.

Researchers also will cultivate additional aquaculture species, such as bay scallops, sea urchin and an array of seaweeds. The U.S. Department of Agriculture will participate in the research, Gomez-Chiarri said.

U.S. Sen. Jack Reed, D-R.I., senior member of the Senate Appropriations Committee, secured \$1.3 million in federal funding for the project and provided another \$1 million earmarked for URI in 2022 to support aquaculture and seafood research in the region. Rhode Island is home to 84 oyster farms and there are hundreds more in the region, according to research provided by Reed's office.

Shellfish is Raso's passion. His celebrated Matunuck Oyster Bar stands a mere stone's throw away from the site of the future research center.

Raso said he had a dream in 2018 to build a hatchery to supply his oyster farm. He secured permits in 2019. But when he put the project out to bid, "the cost of everything had gone through the roof," he said.

He needed a partner.

"Hatcheries are not a high-profit business venture," he said. "So I had to figure out what to do from a business standpoint."

The answer came during an encounter with Pete Rumsey, chief business development officer at the University of Rhode Island Research Foundation. With Rumsey's advice, Raso brokered an agreement with URI and received funding through the U.S. Department of Commerce.

The dream is nearly fulfilled. Raso said construction should be complete by the end of September. After the facility is fully outfitted, production should begin in spring 2024.

Raso looks forward to serving up the shellfish developed at the research center at his restaurant.

"I've had fantastic oysters all over the nation, but the Rhode Island oysters have the best reputation of any oyster in the world," he said. "You have oysters with melon or cucumber flavors.

"But what I really love is the contrast between one oyster and another. Different areas can produce radically different tastes," he said. "There's no better way of tasting the environment than eating an oyster."

Sam Wood is a staff writer at PBN. Contact him at wood@pbn.com