Alaska Oyster Growers Manual
4th Edition

A resource for new and experienced farmers including recommended culture techniques, explanations of various culture systems, business planning assistance, and a guide to obtaining permits and leases

Alaskan Shellfish Growers Association and Alaska Sea Grant Marine Advisory Program, University of Alaska Fairbanks
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This manual is dedicated to Art King for his tireless efforts to help shellfish farming in Alaska grow. King (left) helps ASGA president Rodger Painter (center) and Ray RaLonde, of the Alaska Sea Grant Marine Advisory Program, shuck purple-hinged rock scallops for a research project.
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Chapter 1. Introduction

Rodger Painter

Most people are drawn to oyster farming in Alaska for the lifestyle. While there’s nothing wrong with the desire to make a living by growing a high quality food amidst some of the world’s most spectacular scenery, if you don’t view your farm as a business from the beginning you are more likely to grow more regrets than world class oysters.

Frankly, starting any new small business in rural Alaska is not the best strategy for generating a healthy return on investment, and entering a still unproven industry adds additional uncertainty. So, why should anyone even consider it?

While there are many challenges, growing oysters is one of the few promising small business opportunities in most rural coastal communities from Dixon Entrance to Cook Inlet. Mechanization, improved husbandry, and the introduction of more efficient culture systems are helping farmers increase production and improve product quality. The image of the Alaska oyster in the marketplace is very positive and market demand far outstripped production at the end of 2010.

The real draw of oyster farming and shellfish aquaculture, for me, has been the ability to create a sustainable, environmentally friendly business in rural Alaska—something that may benefit my grandchildren or community for decades or even centuries. I grew up in a Kenai Peninsula fishing village that no longer has a processing plant and is now home to many fewer fishermen than during my pre-statehood childhood. Very few of my extended family in Ninilchik own limited entry permits. Shellfish aquaculture has the potential to diversify and strengthen the economic base of communities like Ninilchik throughout coastal Alaska.

Planning a new farm or shifting to a new culture method is challenging. As a farmer, you must make critical decisions when you know the least about the realities of the new enterprise or culture method.

Farming oysters is more similar to growing apples than it is to commercial fishing or subsistence harvesting of marine resources. Shellfish and apple growers must invest considerable front-end capital and labor for many years before any significant revenues are generated from harvests. In addition, any mistakes made during the early years of farming affects you for years down the road.

Doing your homework is vital.
This fourth edition of the *Alaska Oyster Grower’s Manual* is designed to help you with that homework. The result of a collaborative effort between the Alaskan Shellfish Growers Association (ASGA) and the Alaska Sea Grant Marine Advisory Program (MAP), the manual covers all phases of developing and operating oyster culture systems, as well as the business of growing oysters.

The manual provides detailed information on growing oysters in both lantern nets and trays, methods that have been utilized in Alaska for decades. While less information is available on bag and beach culture of oysters because of limited experience among local growers, these methods are presented because they appear to hold great potential in some areas.

ASGA surveyed all active growers to gather information used in the manual, particularly in development of recommended husbandry methods. ASGA also interviewed individual growers, gathered recommendations at its 2010 annual meeting, and had the manual reviewed by members of the industry.

The manual represents the pooling of a half-century of combined experience in Alaska aquaculture of its two primary authors, Ray RaLonde, MAP’s aquaculture specialist, and me, Rodger Painter. RaLonde has been involved in shellfish aquaculture projects in Alaska too numerous to list over the past three decades as University of Alaska Fairbanks MAP faculty, professor at Sheldon Jackson College in Sitka, and teacher on Annette Island. I’ve been a shellfish grower and aquaculture researcher/consultant, and have managed numerous projects for ASGA as president or vice president for the past 20 years.

The first edition of the *Alaska Oyster Grower’s Manual* was published by MAP in the early 1980s and the third edition in 1987. The first version of the *Alaska Oyster Grower’s Manual* pulled together in one place virtually all the information available at that time on farming oysters in Alaska. While the dictionary-size document was helpful, a new farmer would not have been able to negotiate the permitting process or write a business plan based on what he or she read in the manual. The document was also of little help to an experienced farmer considering shifting to a new culture method or wanting to investigate new defouling methods.

Ray RaLonde and I have long discussed the need for creating a new resource document for new and experienced oyster farmers. For me, the manual is the culmination of a decade-long quest to ensure that no one else makes the same mistakes I did during my two decades as an oyster farmer in Alaska.

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