TOP STORY | EDITOR'S PICK

Bogue Sound stakeholders talk shellfish leasing following moratorium sunset

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Stakeholders from the N.C. Division of Marine Fisheries, N.C. Fisheries Association, NOAA, local university marine science labs, the state House of Representatives, Carteret County government and the towns of Atlantic Beach, Cape Carteret, Cedar Point, Emerald Isle, Morehead City and Pine Knoll Shores met Wednesday to discuss shellfish cultivation leases in the Bogue Sound(Photo: Marianne Waldrop)

CEDAR POINT — After the July 1 sunset of a moratorium that suspended shellfish cultivation lease applications in Bogue Sound, stakeholders involved with the estuary met Wednesday morning in Cedar Point for a preliminary discussion on minimizing potential user conflicts that could arise from future leases.

The meeting, organized by Carteret County District 4 Commissioner Marianne Waldrop and North Carolina Rep. Celeste Cairns, R-Carteret, brought together municipal policymakers along Bogue Banks, state and federal marine scientists, the N.C. Division of Marine Fisheries, the N.C. Fisheries Association, academics, aquaculture specialists and, via cellphone, state Sen. Norm Sanderson, R-Pamlico.

Each party, to varying degrees, shared an interest in opening the waterway to leases while ensuring continued, robust recreational use of the sound.

As a result of the meeting, aquaculture specialists in attendance plan to educate municipal representatives on what leases look like in practice using a research lease in Bogue Sound shared by Carteret Community College and the NC State University Center for Marine Sciences and Technology. And, as the state agency that governs and issues shellfish leases, Division of Marine Fisheries representatives expressed an intent to inform local policymakers of the application process, which can be lengthy and is only open from March 1 to Aug. 1.

To reach a general consensus among the group, further discussions will focus on identifying areas in Bogue Sound that would create the fewest conflicts between lessees, recreational users and other users of the water. These considerations include the potential size of buffer zones extending from the land and which areas may need to remain closed to leases, including locations with submerged aquatic vegetation.

DMF issues these leases in public trust waters, either publicly or privately owned but ultimately subject to Public Trust Rights, or the right of citizens to, among other things, “navigate, swim, hunt, fish, and enjoy all recreational activities in,” a 2025 DMF report notes.

With leases, individuals can privately grow and harvest shellfish for commercial sale. This can be done in three main ways, according to an NC State publication: bottom leases, or growing shellfish atop seafloor oyster beds or rocks; water column leases, or floating cages containing shellfish anchored to the seafloor; and racked system leases, or shellfish in cages on racks anchored to the seafloor.

Moratoriums, or temporary suspensions, of shellfish cultivation leases in Bogue Sound have been in place since 2019, but in two different iterations. The first extended from July 2019 to July 2021. The next, issued in November 2021, just ended July 1.

Wednesday’s meeting comes after House Bill 1113, which sought to extend multiple shellfish lease moratoria, stalled in the North Carolina House of Representatives Rules Committee in June. The Atlantic Beach Town Council brought local attention to the moratorium’s sunset in a May resolution urging for an extension until 2028.

H.B. 1113 would have added five years to the moratorium covering New Hanover and portions of Pender and Onslow counties.

Despite the title naming New Hanover, Pender and Onslow counties, the original draft of the bill erroneously only included language covering the portion of the Bogue Sound east of the Emerald Isle Bridge and west of the Atlantic Beach bridge. A May 19 draft corrected this language, focusing the moratorium solely on New Hanover county and portions of Pender and Onslow counties, for another five-year term. Though Rep. Cairns sought to reinstate the language covering the Bogue Sound in the bill, she was unable to do so prior to the July 1 expiration of the most recent moratorium.

Even so, H.B. 1113 ultimately halted in committee, opening the waters in the Bogue Sound, Pender and Onslow counties up for lease applications.

Sen. Michael Lee (R-New Hanover) was able, however, to include a provision in the state budget that passed July 2, extending the county’s moratorium on shellfish leasing until July 1, 2028. The moratorium there covers the waters southeast of the Wrightsville Beach Bridge down to Snow’s Cut.

Though Rep. Cairns worked with Rep. Carson Smith, R-Onslow, and the bill’s original sponsor, Rep. Ted Davis, R-New Hanover, to extend the moratoria, she explained Wednesday that each approached the bill with different intentions.

Cairns sought the extra time to attain stakeholder consensus, with the intent of eventually opening Bogue Sound to leases in a way that minimized user conflicts. Rep. Davis wanted to extend the moratorium for five years, “and his goal, ultimately, was not to let his area open up,” Cairns said.

Rep. Smith, on the other hand, sought a two-year extension to allow time for the North Carolina Collaboratory, the General Assembly’s research arm, to complete a study on how to approach shellfish leasing while balancing economic, environmental and public access interests.

Smith first pursued the study via House Bill 841, which stalled in the Senate Rules Committee last May. Blair Rhoades, strategic communications leader of the N.C. Collaboratory, affirmed in a phone call with the News-Times that the study was successfully commissioned by the 2026 N.C. Farm Act, which passed June 10.

The Collaboratory is slated to present an interim report on the study — partly headed by Duke University Marine Lab Director Joel Fodrie, who was also in attendance Wednesday — this December, and a final report with legislative and regulatory recommendations next May.

The group of local stakeholders will continue to meet in order to establish a path forward on Bogue Sound shellfish cultivation leases that balances commercial, recreational and environmental interests.