

SOLOMONS, MD - Congressman Steny H. Hoyer (D-MD) delivered the opening remarks at the third annual State of the Patuxent River Summit held today at the Calvert Marine Museum in Solomons. The Summit drew scientists, watermen, public policy makers, elected officials, aquaculturists, and environmental activists from around the region to debate major initiatives related to oyster restoration in the Chesapeake Bay.

Below are Congressman Hoyer's remarks as prepared for delivery.

"Good afternoon. I am pleased to be able to join with you today for the third State of the Patuxent River Summit.

"And I am particularly excited about the focus of today's summit - the Chesapeake's Eastern oyster.

"This discussion - dubbed the Great Oyster Debate - could not be more timely.

"Next Friday, the Army Corps of Engineers is expected to release its environmental impact statement on potential methods to restore the oyster population in - as the Algonquins called it - the Great Shellfish Bay.

"This was authorized by Congress in the 2003, and the Corps has been the lead federal agency - working with a number of interested agencies, groups, and experts to analyze the ecological, cultural, and economic impacts of several alternative oyster restoration strategies.

"These options include expanding restoration efforts of our native oyster, implementing a temporary oyster harvest moratorium, establishing a large-scale oyster aquaculture industry, and introducing a non-native species.

"All topics that I am sure will be passionately addressed today.

"The fact that such a variety of individuals - scientists, watermen, environmental advocates, local, state, and federal officials, and private citizens - have come together to understand and tackle the challenges we face in preserving these priceless natural resources underscores just how important their health is to all of us.

"I guess, though, it shouldn't come as much of a surprise.

"For more than 20 years, many of us have gathered with Bernie Fowler on the shores of the Patuxent at Broomes Island to participate in the annual River Wade-in.

"In 1988, the year of the first Wade-in, Senator Fowler only got to 10 inches of water before he lost sight of his sneakers.

"There have been improvements in water clarity since 1988; however, as of late, we have been moving in the wrong direction and, I am sad to report, the state of our river is poor.

"Last summer, Bernie waded out into waters 26 inches deep before his sneakers disappeared. This was up somewhat from the previous year, but down from the 42.5 inches we saw in 2002.

"Bernie readily admits that his method is somewhat unscientific, but his findings have been validated by the recent report card issued by the University of Maryland Center for Environmental Science and the Patuxent Riverkeeper.

"The 2007 Patuxent River report card gave our river watershed a D- an alarming grade, no doubt, and one which is made even more alarming for those of us who live here in Southern Maryland. The lower portion of the river - where we are today - rated an F.

"While the report card did not specifically assess the health of our fish and shellfish, it did determine that the conditions under which these creatures can thrive - or even survive - are

significantly lacking.

“Our efforts to restore the Patuxent River, the Chesapeake Bay, and the oyster population demand cooperation and the involvement of all levels of government, the scientific community, business, development, and agricultural sectors, and a sense of ownership among all citizens.

“I am pleased to report that in recent months, we have advanced a number of bills in the Congress that would have a direct impact on the efforts to nurse this river and the Chesapeake Bay back to health.

“We've strengthened the ability of the Army Corps of Engineers to undertake Bay oyster restoration, water pollution control and environmental infrastructure projects in the 2007 WRDA bill.

“And, we've included approximately \$438 million in mandatory funding in the Farm Bill to help Chesapeake Bay Watershed farmers in their ongoing efforts to implement practices to prevent runoff and control shoreline erosion.

“The provision also directs the secretary to give special consideration to producers in specific, targeted river watersheds, including those of the Potomac and, I am pleased to note, the Patuxent.

“We also passed legislation reauthorizing the Chesapeake Bay Gateways and Watertrails Network, which links together the many historical, cultural, and natural sites in the watershed in the hopes of enabling visitors to better understand and appreciate the role they can play in the Bay's survival.

“And we passed a bill introduced by my Maryland colleague, Rep. John Sarbanes, which seeks to ensure that the importance of environmental education in our schools is not overlooked and that future generations are equipped with the tools necessary to tackle problems like restoring our oyster population.

"I look forward to hearing the outcome of your discussions and will continue to work hard at the federal level to secure funding and provide resources necessary to ensure that we may restore the health of our river and our once bountiful shellfish fishery."

The Summit's program also included University of Maryland anthropologist Dr. Michael Paolisso, who spoke on the cultural significance of the oyster and potential solutions for restoration. Dr. Paolisso's presentation was followed by The Great Oyster Debate. Jack Greer, Director of the Environmental Finance Center at the University System of Maryland, served as moderator. The debate participants included George Abbe from the Morgan State Estuarine Research Laboratory; Edwin "Smitty" Smith who represented the local watermen; Tom O'Connell, Director of the Department of Natural Resources Fisheries Services; and aquaculturist Luke Breza. Former Senator Bernie Fowler closed the Summit with a Call to Action.

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