

Oyster farming gains momentum

Houston woman, restaurant owner in Corpus plan to launch efforts

By Matt Wyatt STAFF WRITER



Kara Thompson / Contributor

Oyster farming operations like this would allow Texas to produce oysters year-round.

The trailblazers of Texas' fledgling oyster mariculture industry are inching closer to establishing farms in the state's bay systems.

Hannah Kaplan, a 30-year-old Houston native, quit her full-time job several months ago to focus on launching an oyster farm in East Galveston Bay. She was the first person to submit an application to Texas Parks and Wildlife Department after the agency laid the framework for the industry last year.

"There's pros and cons to being the first," Kaplan said. "But it's really exciting to be the first to submit an application and have this amazing learning experience with this industry."

Kaplan is embracing the challenges that come with being a groundbreaker. She is jumping into this industry without any prior experience in mariculture but is leaning on members of the small, tight-knit community of those building this industry and her father, Joe, who has experience in starting businesses, to learn as she goes.

"I believe the biggest obstacle will be successfully growing the first round of oyster spat we put in the water," said Kaplan, adding she is planning to use two different types of equipment at first to figure out what works best.

"Overall, we have a plan in place for day-to-day operations, but the first round of spat will be a test on us to determine what really works best for the growth of the oysters."

Kaplan said the sustainability aspect of oyster farming appeals to her. She said the need is great with wild oyster harvest in decline and reefs closing to overfishing. She is also confident in the market for her product.

Also, Kaplan, along with others venturing into this industry, will enjoy the economic advantages that come with farming instead of fishing.

“Our goal is to be able to produce oysters year-round, which gives us an advantage over natural oyster production, which is only allowed during certain months of the year,” said Kaplan.

Texas oyster season opened Nov. 1 and will run through April 30. Oyster farmers also will be allowed to harvest at 2½ inches, while wild oysters are considered legal at 3.

Down the coast in Corpus Christi, well-known restaurant owner Brad Lomax will be able to enhance his business with the ability to bring oysters directly from farm to table and cut out the middleman.

Lomax says he sells 600,000 oysters a year between his Water Street Oyster Bar and Executive Surf Club. Those oysters are currently a mixture of wild-caught from Aransas Bay and farm-raised from out of state.

He is planning to meet that demand in the future with floating cages on an eight-acre site in Copano Bay. Lomax is hoping to harvest his first batch around this time next year.

Aside from supplying his own oysters for Water Street, Lomax is eager to brand and market his product up and down the coast. He already has a name licensed that pays homage to his establishment: O-Bar Ranch.

“The branding opportunities are endless,” said Lomax, adding that the rich history of the region, from the Karankawa Native American tribe to 17th century French explorer La Salle and beyond, provide those unique branding opportunities.

Lomax aims to continue educating his customers on a product he considers superior to the wild-caught version on the half-shell market. Farm-raised oysters are cleaner, deeper-cut, better sized and can be refined to produce unique tastes, akin to a vintner creating fine wine.

Like Kaplan, Lomax appreciates the sustainability of oyster farming.

Over a decade ago, Dr. Joe Fox from Texas A&M-Corpus Christi encouraged Lomax to recycle his restaurant’s oyster shells back into the bay. As a result, about 15 acres of oyster reefs were created because of Water Street Oyster Bar.

“One of the things I’m most proud of in my career is that we did that,” Lomax said.

Kaplan, Lomax and the budding group of Texas commercial oyster farmers will lean on the knowledge and experience of Fox, who along with now-retired TPWD deputy director of coastal fisheries Lance Robinson helped spearhead the creation of this industry.

“I’d gotten a little bit fed up with the fact that Texas was really the only state in the nation with a coastline that didn’t have an oyster aquaculture industry,” said Fox, who can be considered the father of Texas oyster farming.

The professor runs two research farms, one in Copano Bay and the other in Matagorda. He is currently developing a site suitability map for Copano Bay in conjunction with Texas Sea Grant, creating a workforce development facility and renovating a seed hatchery near Palacios. Fox also works with the Harte Research Institute. He is a busy man, to say the least.

The creation of a seed hatchery in Texas will be instrumental to the future success of the industry. Currently, oyster farmers would have to send brood stock from their bay systems to other states to be spawned.

That is not the only challenge, though. The start-up process is arduous, involving multiple permits from multiple agencies, and the actual selection of sites for these farms can be problematic. There is a litany of parameters, such as keeping farms out of the proximity of oil and gas operations, other oyster reefs, sea grass beds and other sensitive habitat areas. The sites are also subject to public comment.

Each site will have its own specific ecological challenges to deal with, too.

“Texas bays are very different from other bays around the Gulf and certainly those along the Eastern Seaboard,” said Fox, noting that Texas bays, though the warm water is advantageous for growing oysters quickly, are often shallow, wind-driven, mud-flat types that can get blown out by north winds and other environmental obstacles.

Marketing also will be a considerable hurdle. Texas oysters do not yet have the consumer recognition attached to East Coast oysters, which sell at a higher price. Fox said Texas oyster farmers will have to be creative in selling their wares to the restaurants that will push them. Each bay system is different and can produce a unique taste, shape and brand.

“It’s no longer that you’re just the farmer, you also have to be the entrepreneur. You have to be your own marketing agent and you have to hustle,” Fox said.

With the serpentine permitting process, site and gear selection and finding buyers out of the way, the day-to-day work itself is also not a walk in the park. Oyster farms need constant management and supervision.

“It’s real hard work. You’re dealing with a living organism... it doesn’t take off like you might want to take off on the weekend,” said Fox.

Despite these challenges that Texas oyster farming pioneers face, the advantages over the wild-caught oyster market are still immense. Farmers can optimize their products with single, half-shell oysters that sell for a higher price than clumps harvested off reefs. Oyster farmers get to sleep in their own beds, and they know exactly where their handiwork is at all times. The costs associated with boats and fuel will be minimized, all while helping the environment with an oyster that can be produced year-round and at a smaller size.

Lomax will have a public hearing for his site in early March and Kaplan hopes that she will have one not long after.

After sites are approved and permits obtained, it will finally be time to break ground — or water, rather — on a new industry in Texas. matt.wyatt@chron.com twitter.com/mattdwyatt