

VIMS prof briefs Congress on “splendors” of seagrass

By David Malmquist

Orth describes restoration success during Capitol Hill “Coast Day”

(March 11, 2014) Professor Robert “JJ” Orth of William & Mary’s Virginia Institute of Marine Science briefed Congressional representatives and staffers this week on the factors that have contributed to the success of his collaborative efforts to restore eelgrass and scallops to the seaside bays of Virginia’s Eastern Shore.

Orth’s briefing took place during “Coast Day” on Capitol Hill, an annual event organized by the Coastal States Organization. He spoke as part of “Coastal Zone Management: Protecting Coastal Communities and Economies in your District,” which the CSO hosted for members of the Senate and House in conjunction with California Representative Sam Farr. Staffers from the offices of Virginia congressman Rob Wittman and Senator Mark Warner joined other Congressional representative during the presentations.

An earlier session, which focused on NOAA’s National Estuarine Research Reserve System, featured Judy Gwartney-Green of Peasley Middle School in Gloucester. Gwartney-Green, Chesapeake Bay Trust’s 2014 Regional Teacher of the Year, provided a case study of how her partnership with Dr. William Reay and Sarah Nuss of the Chesapeake Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve at VIMS has helped her and her students to become better stewards of local waters and marine life.

Coastal Zone Management

Orth’s session provided case studies from Virginia and three other coastal states highlighting the success of programs supported by NOAA’s Coastal Zone Management Program, or CZM. The national CZM Program is a voluntary partnership between the federal government and 34 U.S. coastal and Great Lake states and territories. By combining federal and state funds, the program strengthens the capabilities of each partner to address coastal issues.

Virginia’s CZM Program, headquartered in the Commonwealth’s Department of Environmental Quality, has received more than \$61 million in federal funding since its inception in 1986, matched by more than \$51 million in state and local funds. The program applies and disburses the funds statewide to help protect and restore the Commonwealth’s coastal resources, manage development along low-lying or exposed shorelines, preserve working waterfronts, and provide public access for recreation, among other uses.



Briefing: VIMS professor Robert JJ Orth briefs Congressional representatives during Coast Day on Capitol Hill. ©Lindsey Kraatz/CSO.

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Orth says that funds from Virginia's CZM Program have played a key role in advancing his efforts to restore eelgrass and bay scallops to Virginia's seaside bays. During his briefing, Orth noted that, "Our seagrass restoration project, one of the most successful and largest in the world, wouldn't have been possible without financial support from NOAA's Virginia Coastal Zone Management Program and its director Laura McKay." The work has also been supported by The Nature Conservancy, the Keith Campbell Foundation for the Environment, and the Virginia Marine Resources Commission's Recreational Fishing License Fund.

Orth began sowing eelgrass seeds into the shallow waters of Virginia's coastal bays in 1999. Barren at the time, the bays are now home to 4,700 acres of lush eelgrass meadow.

A related project, begun in 2009, aims to restock these meadows with a viable population of bay scallops. These tasty bivalves supported a valuable commercial fishery in the early 1900s but were completely wiped out in the 1930s by an eelgrass disease and a devastating 1933 hurricane.

Mark Luckenbach, Associate Dean of Research and Advisory Service at VIMS, says "This integrated restoration program will greatly accelerate our collaborative efforts to restore these valuable coastal resources, which are critical not only to the ecological health of the coastal bays, but to the economic health of the region's seafood industry."

Seagrass Oscars

Giving a nod to last Sunday's Academy Award presentation, Orth ended his briefing by bestowing "Seagrass Oscars" on a cast of deserving characters. His "Best Producer" award went to NOAA and its Office of Ocean and Coastal Resource Management for their operation of the National Coastal Zone Management Program.

Other awardees were:

- Best Director: Virginia Coastal Zone Management Program
- Best Actor: Eelgrass
- Best Supporting Actor: Bay scallop
- Best Picture: Aerial photo of grass bed
- Best Visual: NOAA spelled with eelgrass plants
- Best Original Poem: Eelgrass by Edna St. Vincent Millay

Joining Orth in the briefing were Dr. Jennifer Jurado, Director of the Natural Resources Planning & Management Division for Broward County, Florida; Mr. Leo Asuncion, Planning Program Manager for the Hawaii Ocean Resources Management Plan; and Mr. Bruce Carlisle, Director of the Massachusetts Office of Coastal Zone Management.

Congressman Farr was introduced by Mr. Charles Lester, Executive Director of the California Coastal Commission, who thanked him for being a champion on ocean issues, especially coastal-zone management. Kathleen Leyden, Director of the Maine Coastal Program and chair of the Coastal States Organization, introduced the program and discussed how the network of state coastal programs helps to improve the resiliency of coastal communities nationwide. She also moderated a question and answer period following the presentations.

The Coastal States Organization is U.S. non-profit that represents the Governors of the nation's 35 coastal states, commonwealths, and territories.



Briefing: A standing-room-only crowd of more than 120 people attended the briefing on the Coastal Zone Management Program. ©Lou Cafiero/NOAA.