

VIMS hosts Working Waterfronts Workshop

By Erin Kelly

(March 6, 2014) Business owners, community leaders, watermen, researchers, lawyers, and local and state planners gathered at the Virginia Institute of Marine Science last week to explore the issues arising from the slow decline in Virginia's working waterfronts, and to jointly identify possible solutions.

The daylong workshop—hosted by VIMS and accessed remotely from Eastern Shore Community College—brought more than 140 participants to Gloucester Point. Participants heard from 17 speakers who touched on legal issues related to working waterfronts, the economic importance of these waterfronts, and the continued development of Virginia's plan for sustaining them.

The Virginia Coastal Zone Management (CZM) Program sponsored and planned the event along with a committee that included representatives from the businesses and coastal localities that rely on working waterfronts.

Virginia CZM is partnering with VIMS' Marine Advisory Service Program and Virginia Sea Grant to develop public policy designed to protect and enhance Virginia's traditional waterfront businesses.

As elsewhere around the nation, waterfront businesses suffer from increasing demands for waterfront property, with consequent increases in property values and higher operating costs. The loss of Virginia's working waterfronts has long-term consequences for local economies, the environment, coastal culture, and quality of life.

While residential development and other factors continue to threaten the viability of working waterfronts, coastal states and localities are increasingly aware of the issue. Many are using planning, zoning, land conservation and acquisition tax incentives, public improvements, and state and local regulations to help preserve these valuable assets. These initiatives are often a result of collaboration between industry associations, nonprofit groups, and government agencies with a common interest in protecting waterfront businesses.

Thomas Murray, Associate Director of Advisory Service at VIMS, says Virginia's waterfronts are of great historic, economic, and cultural significance. "The access to coastal waters that working waterfronts provide is essential for commercial and recreational fisheries, boating, aquaculture, and other uses that make the production of economic resources from natural resources possible," he says.

Murray—who also serves as Extension Program Leader for the Virginia Sea Grant Program at VIMS—has been involved with enhancing Virginia's working waterfronts since 1999. Because of his commitment to keeping the nation's waterfronts at work for recreational boating, and championing water-dependent businesses and industry that drive local economic development, Murray was recognized at the 2013 National Working Water-



VIMS Associate Director of
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front Workshop in Seattle with a Recreational Boating Access Award from the Boat Owners Association of the United States (BoatUS).

Murray stresses the importance of holding these workshops to engage stakeholders in discussion of the various pressures have led to a decline in water-dependent business activity. “In a sense, it has been a disaster in slow motion,” he says. “Once the access and infrastructure is gone, it’s difficult to recover.”

One of the many challenges that come with a loss of working waterfronts is a potential loss of jobs for local watermen. Tommy Leggett, an oyster grower and owner of Chessie Seafood and Aquafarms says, “Loss of working waterfronts is one of the most important issues facing fishermen in terms of our future. We can catch all of the crabs, oysters, and fish that resource managers allow us, but if there is no working waterfront on which to land our products, the harvesting is pointless.”

Since 2011, grants from Virginia CZM have allowed VIMS, VASG, and their partners to define working waterfronts, create an inventory of existing working waterfront infrastructure throughout the coastal zone, and conduct an economic analysis of four different types of working-waterfronts infrastructure to demonstrate their economic importance to the community.

Murray served as the project lead for taking inventory of existing working-waterfront sites. The inventories captured precise location, specialized support services, unique site features, and in some cases, planning efforts toward future transfer of site ownership.

As for the future, Virginia CZM, VIMS, and their partners plan to identify and develop policy tools for retention of working waterfronts that are appropriate for adoption by local governments. The partners will also identify a locality to participate in a demonstration project that will test the feasibility of implementing the identified tools.

The Virginia CZM Program is funding development of the working waterfronts strategy through a CZMA Section 309 grant from the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA).

Murray calls the workshop a success, saying it “provided the opportunity for stakeholders to become directly involved in clarifying the issues and challenges facing Virginia’s working waterfronts, and to develop strategic steps moving forward.”



Working Watermen: A fisherman offloads at Guinea Landing in Gloucester County. Located near Gloucester Point, the Guinea area has historically been the center of the seafood industry in the county. Photo by Larry Chewning