

Apalachicola Bay Oyster Management and Statewide Rule Development



July 15, 2025

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission





Overarching Goals for Apalachicola Bay

Overarching goals

- Restore 2,000 acres by 2032
- Re-establish oyster fishery with long term clutching program

Path forward

- Short-term steps:
 - Limited opening of the fishery
 - Conduct restoration (contingent on funding)
 - Continue to keep some areas closed
- Near and long-term steps:
 - Secure funding for restoration and maintenance
 - Annual budget between \$30-\$55 million (contingent on funding)



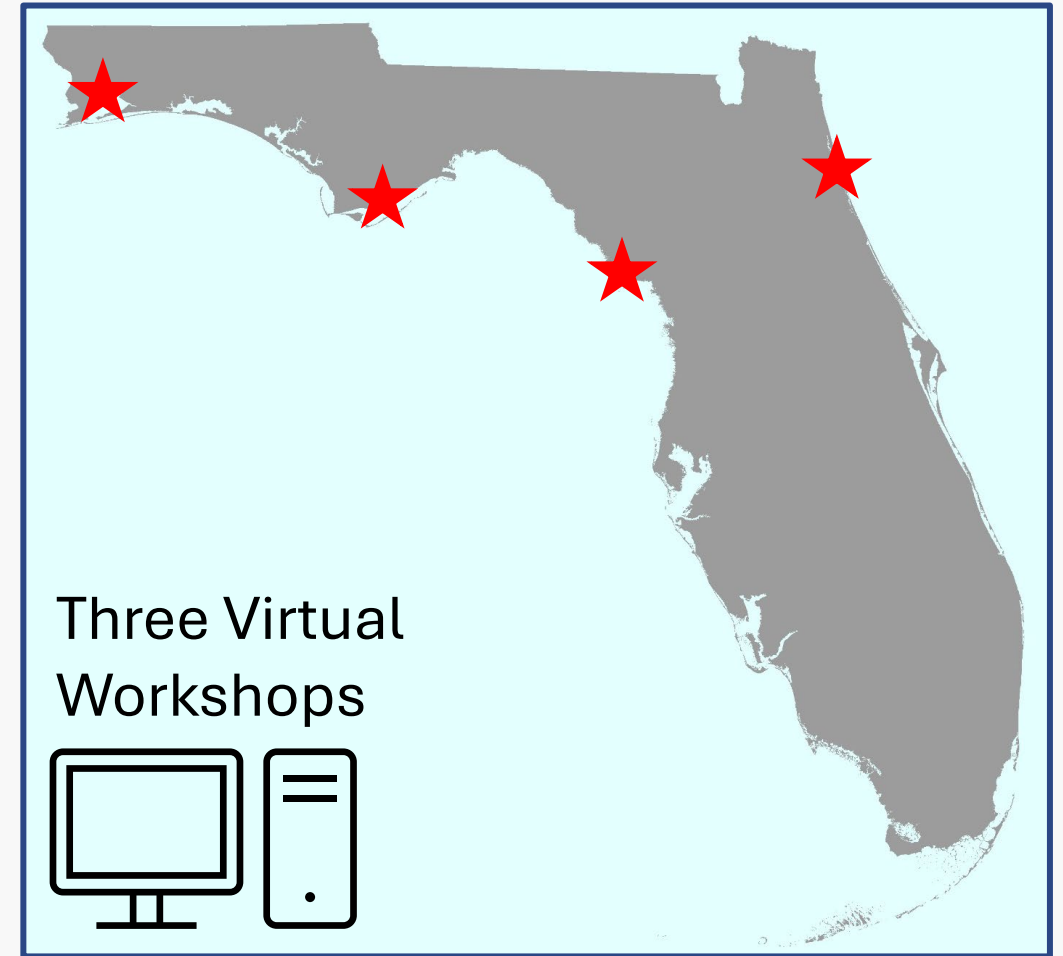
Why is FWC Considering Rulemaking?

- Old harvest regulations do not match the current state of the resource
- Many estuaries in Florida have lost 80–90% of oyster reefs
- Apalachicola Bay's oysters collapsed in 2013
- Apalachicola Bay's oyster fishery closed in 2020
 - Closure is scheduled to sunset on January 1, 2026



Public Workshops to Inform Rule Development

- Apalachicola – April 15
- Pensacola – April 16
- Cedar Key – April 22
- St. Augustine – April 29
- Virtual – May 1
- Apalachicola – June 3
- Virtual – June 5
- Virtual – June 26





Objectives for Proposed Rules

Apalachicola Bay

- Create a new management framework for oyster harvest
 - Establish ecological threshold to open reefs
 - Allow conservative harvest levels to support long-term success
 - Provide commercial and recreational harvest opportunities
 - Resume cultching program for harvested reefs

Statewide

- Reduce removals of undersized oysters and substrate from reefs to minimize reef loss

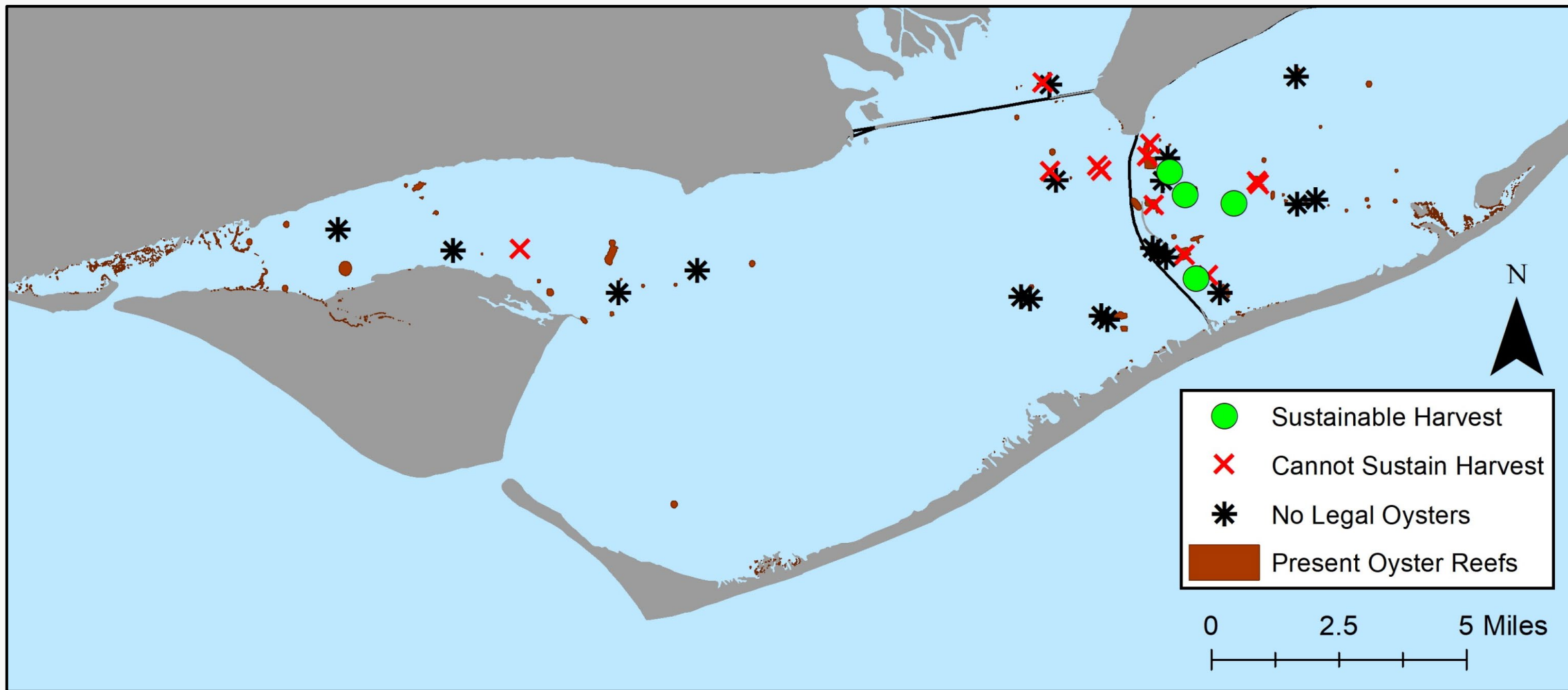


Recommendation for Proposed Management Framework

- Establish a process for determining when to open a reef and setting reef-specific harvest limits
- Establish a procedure for distributing annual harvest limits (bag tags) to participants
 - Commercial
 - Recreational
- Season: Oct. 1 through end of February (first season Oct. 1, 2026)
 - Commercial: Monday – Friday
 - Recreational: Saturday – Sunday
- Establish Commercial Apalachicola Bay (AB) endorsement
 - Option 1: Maximize individual opportunity
 - Option 2: Maximize number of participants
 - Qualifications: Individual or Crew SPL, Shellfish (BV) endorsement, Florida resident, prior landings (year 1 only)
- Establish Apalachicola Bay Recreational Oyster (ABRO) permit
 - Issued through lottery each year
- Mandatory reporting and landing locations
- Re-establish cultching program (dependent on funding)
- *Update statewide culling requirements and undersized oyster tolerances*
- *Rule clean-up*



2025 FWC Monitoring Results



Next Steps

Proposed Rule Hearing

- August 13-14 FWC Commission Meeting in Havana, FL
- Learn more: [MyFWC.com/about/commission/commission-meetings/](https://www.MyFWC.com/about/commission/commission-meetings/)

Ways to Comment

- Submit comments online (www.MyFWC.com/SaltwaterComments)
- Email us at Marine@MyFWC.com
- Attend August 2025 Commission meeting



The following slides are considered backup material and are not anticipated to be part of the actual presentation



Apalachicola Bay Regulations

Regulations prior to closure	
Seasons	Summer: Jun. 1 – Aug. 31 Winter: Sept. 1 – May 31
Monitoring closure	< 300 bags per acre: closed Fri-Sun
Commercial licenses	SPL, Bivalve Endorsement, Bay License
Recreational license	Saltwater fishing license
Bag limit *	Commercial: 2 bags * Recreational: 5 gallons
Minimum size limit	3" (undersized tolerance: 15% attached, 5% unattached)
Allowable gear	Tongs or by hand
FDACS Shellfish Harvesting Areas	Harvest prohibited from closed areas; temporary closures possible
FDACS processing	Oysters must be delivered to certified dealer by certain times. Varies seasonally.

- Harvest closed until Jan. 1, 2026
- FWC considering new regulations for when harvest reopens

* Bag limits modified by FWC Executive Orders



Establish AB Harvest Levels

Purpose: Reduce likelihood of overharvest as ecosystem continues recovery

Potential harvest level: 10% of legal-sized oysters on open reefs

- Set annually and published on FWC website prior to season start
- Similar approach used by other states (examples: Alabama, Mississippi)
- **Example** based on 2025 data:

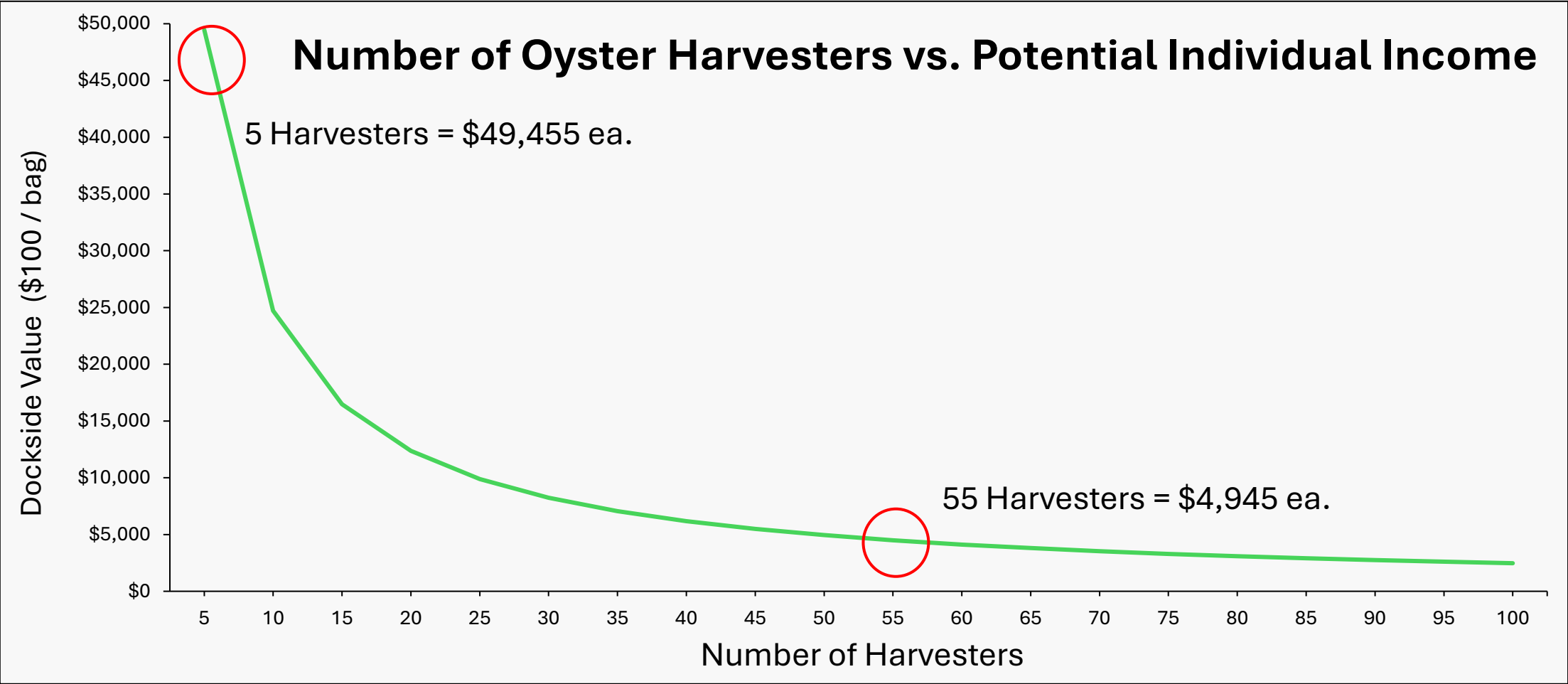
Oyster Reef	Reef Size (acres)	Density (bags/acre)	Harvest Level (bags)
Cat Point NFWF	18	571	1,042
Cat Point Spur	12	400	498
Easthole	43	541	2,318
Peanut Ridge	21	529	1,086
Total	94	--	6,330



Harvest level would apply to commercial and recreational harvest

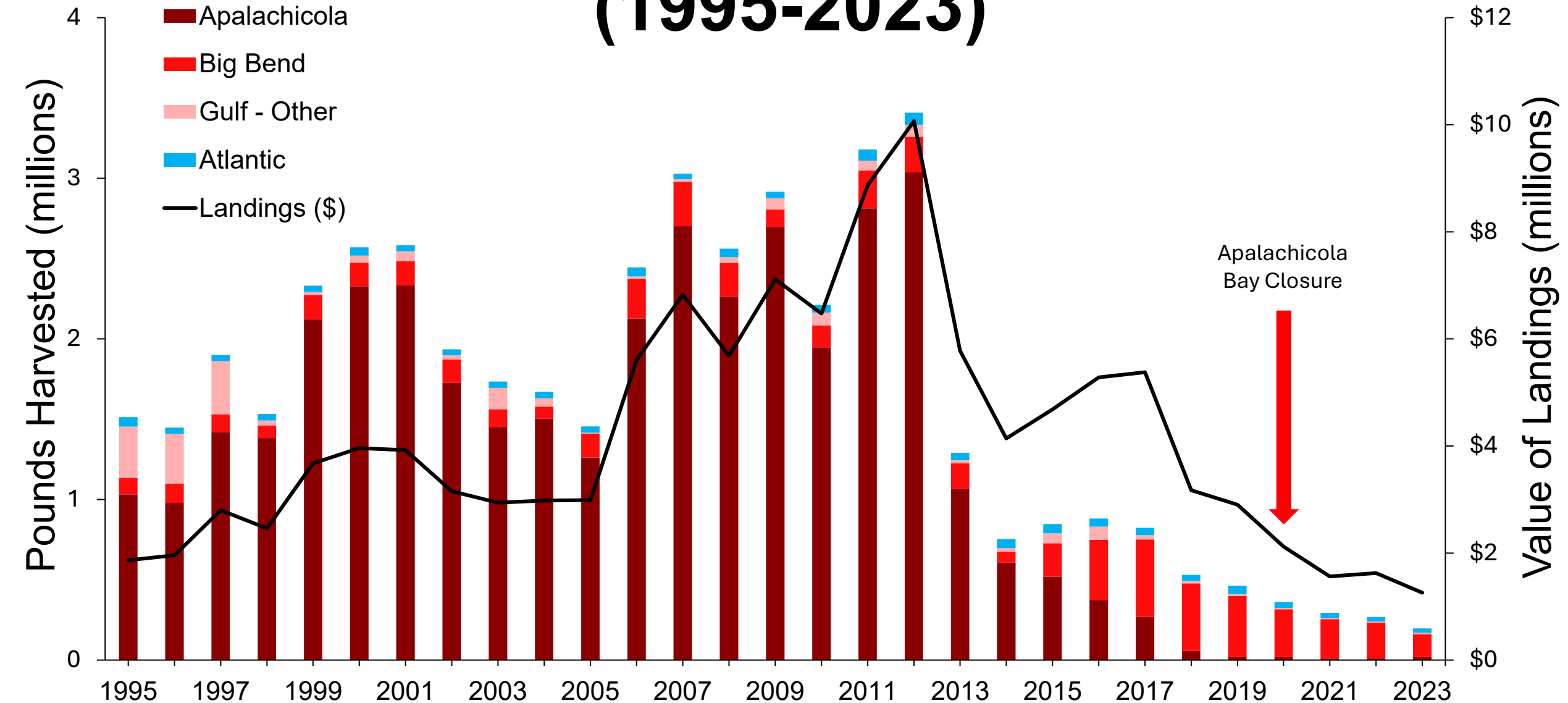


Earning Potential for Commercial Harvesters



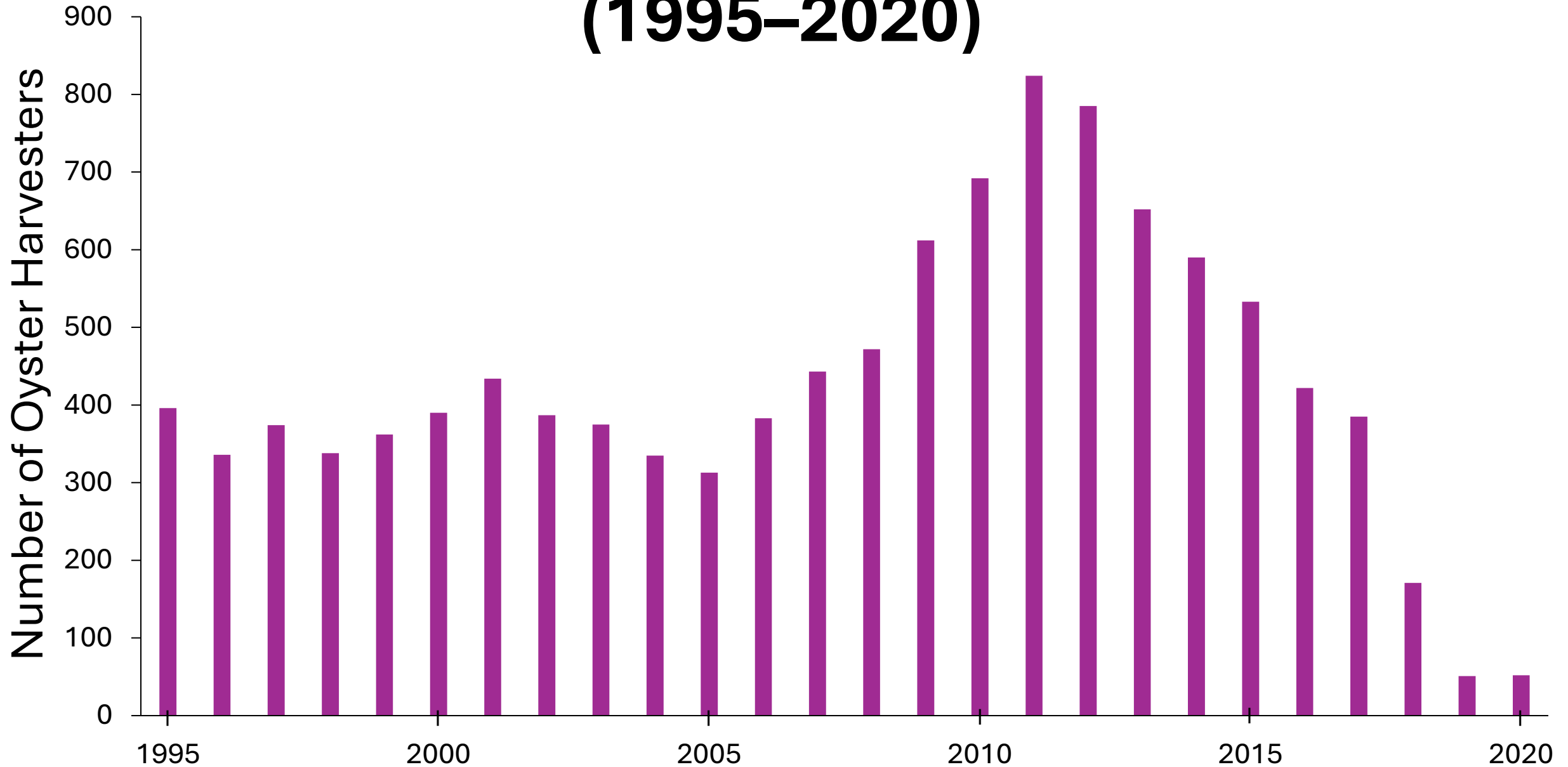


Florida Commercial Oyster Harvest (1995-2023)



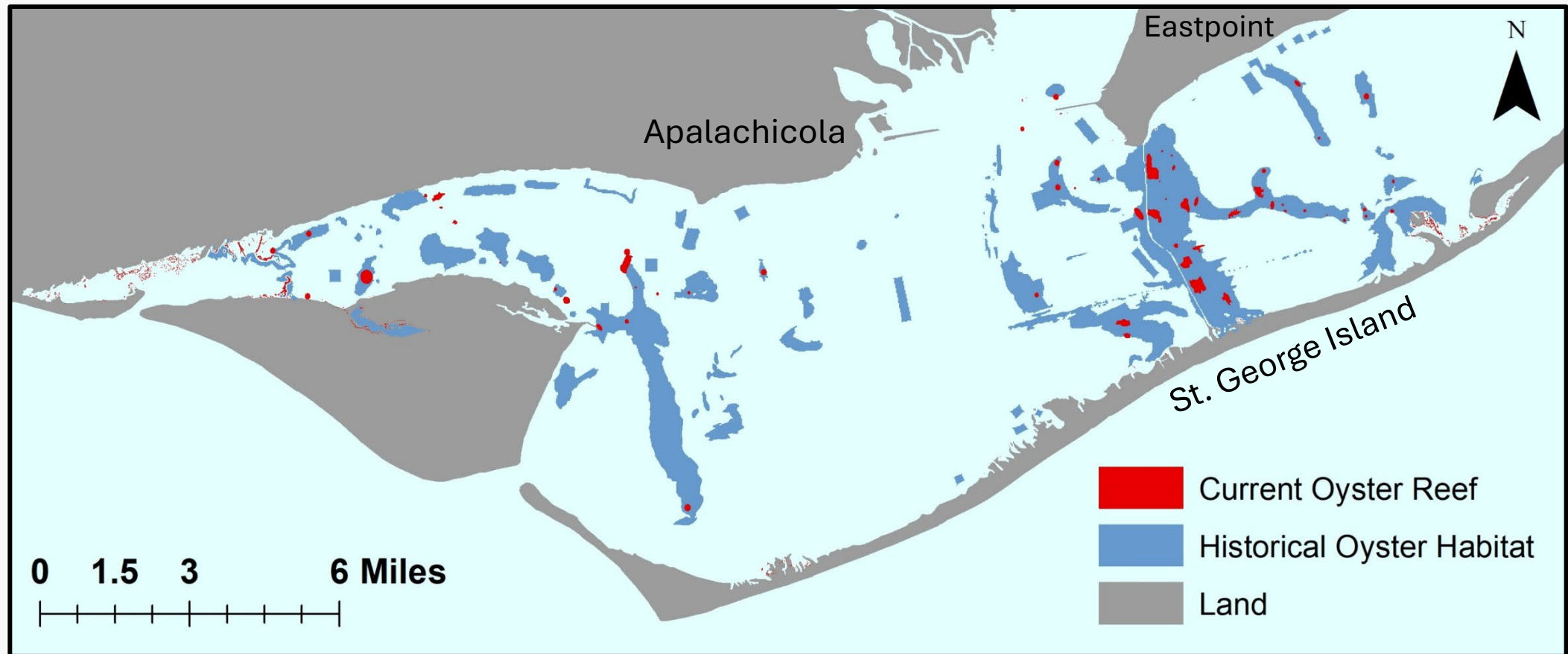


Franklin County Commercial Oyster Harvesters (1995–2020)



Apalachicola Oyster Habitat

Mapping data show a 95% decline in oyster habitat





FWC Oyster Regulations

	Apalachicola Bay (at time of closure)	Elsewhere
Seasons	Summer: Jun. 1 – Aug. 31 Winter: Sept. 1 – May 31	Wakulla, Dixie, Levy counties: Sept. 1 – May 31 Remaining counties: Oct. 1 – Jun. 30
Monitoring closure	< 300 bags per acre: closed Fri-Sun	N/A
Commercial licenses	SPL, Bay License	SPL, Shellfish endorsement
Recreational license	Saltwater fishing license	
Bag limit *	Commercial: 2 bags * Recreational: 5 gallons	Commercial: 20 bags Recreational: 2 bags
Minimum size limit	3" (undersized tolerance: 15% attached, 5% unattached)	
Allowable gear	Tongs or by hand	
FDACS training	Commercial: Shellfish Harvester & Aquaculture Training Course	
FDACS closures	Harvest subject to daily closures for seafood safety concerns	
FDACS processing	Oysters must be delivered to certified dealer by certain times. Varies seasonally.	

* Bag limits modified by FWC Executive Orders. These limits were in place prior to closure

