

Newsroom

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Professor receives grant to help grow Georgia's oyster production

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Jennifer Sweeney Tookes, Ph.D.,

Georgia Southern Assistant Professor of Anthropology Jennifer Sweeney Tookes, Ph.D., has received research funding to help oyster farmers in Georgia develop aquaculture methods for their oyster production.

The goals of this project are to work with Georgia oyster farmers to develop sustainable oyster farming methods of single oysters through aquaculture to increase production; to identify safe and successful means of distribution directly to restaurants throughout the state; and to create culturally appropriate marketing tools and communication channels between oyster farmers and restaurants to ensure the high value of these single oysters is conveyed.

This project is part of a collaborative, multidisciplinary team project with researchers from the University of Georgia and Emory University. Tookes received research funding through a subcontracting agreement with the University of Georgia. The project is sponsored by the USDA-NIFA with the Southern Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program.

The qualitative component of this project will be led by Tookes and Tracy Yandle of Emory University, who will explore ways to connect these artisanal oyster farmers with buyers interested in supporting the local foods movement, as well as what types of education will be necessary for chefs and restaurants to incorporate this product.

Tookes will also work with the oyster farmers to assess their perceptions of the project, the new method of aquaculture and the sustainability of this new form of marketing.

"I enjoy working with Georgia's coastal fishing industry and am excited that this project may provide a new income stream for existing shellfish businesses," said Tookes. "I also know that there are many excellent restaurants in Georgia that will love to have access to a new, premium type of oyster that is produced in our own state. This project is an excellent example of how sustainable local aquaculture can fulfill local food needs."

In 2013, Georgia produced 23,998 pounds of oyster meats valued at \$114,629 from approximately 52,000 acres of approved shellfish growing area. This low volume harvest is a result of the fact that Georgia's oyster industry is built upon wild harvest strategies of clustered oysters where harvest is conducted by hand and is not cost effective.

The demand for high-quality single oysters for the half shell market continues to grow along with the popularity of the "farm-to-table" movement. Most farms in Georgia are small and do not produce enough oysters to transport them using distribution companies and therefore need to find alternative avenues to get oysters to market.

Oysters take on the flavor of the water in which they are grown, and this attribute can increase their marketability. Information about oyster harvest location and the farmer can also appeal to consumers who want to learn more about local foods and support communities that produce them.

The larger project, "Developing sustainable eastern oyster (*Crassostrea virginica*) farming in Georgia through evaluation of growout methodology, distribution, and marketing," is led by Thomas Bliss, director of University of Georgia's Shellfish Research Lab, and was granted \$288,511. Tookes' subcontract on the grant is in the amount of \$68,683. The grant also includes funding for a student researcher at Georgia Southern.

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