

# Pennsylvania Aquaculture Summit Provides PDA Direction

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HARRISBURG (Dauphin Co.) — A Pennsylvania aquaculture summit called by state Secretary of Agriculture Samuel Hayes Jr. was held Thursday at the state Department of Agriculture Building in Harrisburg.

The purpose of the summit was to assess the issues of concern by the industry and to determine possible supportive actions by PDA and other state agencies.

The summit was attended by a group representing some of the growing aquacultural industry in the state.

The last time the industry gathered for such a stakeholder meeting was in 1993, while Boyd Wolff served as agriculture secretary.

The result of that 1993 conference was a draft of issues that have hampered entrepreneurial efforts in aquaculture in Pennsylvania.

On Thursday, the group included many who were involved during the 1993 conference, and apparently many of the issues remain the same and largely unresolved.

Leo Dunn, with the PDA Bureau of Market Development, led the conference.

The meeting began with a review and discussion of eight issues identified and prioritized as matters of concern during 1993.

A general consensus was used to identify areas of concern and assign new priorities, if appropriate.

Secretary Hayes joined the group for about an hour to informally hear concerns. He told the group that aquaculture, its growth and promotion, was very important to the state and that work would be done to help the industry advance.

As with other agricultural ventures, Hayes told the group that first and foremost should be addressing issues that unnecessarily reduce or eliminate profits for aquaculturalists.

He also told the group that Dunn has been aggressive in promoting the concerns of the state aquaculture industry at various levels and opportunities.

He said that while, historically, aquaculture wasn't as large an industry as it is now, it is growing and can be presumed to grow in world importance.

He said that compared to the state's nationally leading agricultural activities, such as dairy and livestock production, that it may seem insignificant to some.

(Dunn said an initial rudimentary survey of the value of Pennsylvania aquaculture resulted in an estimated annual sales of \$12.8 million.)

Nevertheless, Hayes said he believes that logically, aquaculture will increase in importance, especially as wild populations of aquatic food species are continually pressured from world commercial overharvesting and loss of habitat.

He said that with the human population growing, and arable land acres decreasing, other techniques for food and material production are going to have to be found.

Therefore, he said, that while aquaculture is important today, it is going to become even more important. He said its importance is not only in food production, but extends to such areas as the health care industry.

He said aquaculture is a virtually untapped production resource.

The research needed to unlock that potential has to be supported.

But overall, he said that he knows the issues listed and prioritized were important, but, "If we're not talking about profitability, it's not relevant."

Hayes announced that later this year he plans to hold a symposium on agricultural research, and relevancy will be an issue then, because if the research doesn't enhance profitability "... in some manner, it's not relevant."

Also, in order to better serve the industry, it's necessary for the state to have accurate data about the actual extent and diversity of the state's aquacultural production capabilities.

Previously, official surveys were done and information provided to the Pennsylvania Agricultural Statistics Service (PASS).

Now that surveying aquacultural production has been shifted to the purview of PASS, work is underway to develop better, more specific data collection and reporting on actual in-state production.

A representative from PASS told the group that they should review a proposed list of specific different species for which PASS should seek production data.

He said that PASS does not make specific producer information public or available to other governmental agencies, so producers should not be reluctant to provide information for an official survey.

Instead of fearing providing information, if PASS-gathered data can provide for more accurate information regarding the state's aquacultural industry, then its true strengths and value can be better represented when working to expand knowledge and opportunities for the industry.

The effort to find out what the state can do for the aquacultural industry is part of a wider effort by Hayes to be more aggressive in working with various agricultural production sectors, to improve communications and to provide meaningful support by the PDA through promotion or other means, such as research, testing, etc.

Strong efforts have been made in expanding exporting opportunities for Pennsylvania agricultural commodities and processed products, and the aquacultural industry has been becoming more active in more recent years.

The Pennsylvania Aquaculture Association for more than several years has maintained a promotion booth at the Pennsylvania Farm Show Food Court, selling catfish, tilapia, trout and striped bass.

As an aside, the PAA also provided an aquarium for promotional use during the Farm Show. It was used this year, and after the Farm Show, it was moved to the lobby of the PDA Building in Harrisburg.

According to Dunn, it has been suggested that the aquarium can serve as home, on a rotating basis, for different species raised by Pennsylvania aquaculturalists. While it currently is housing goldfish and koi, it could, he said serve as a showcase for several months at a time for different species raised in Pennsylvania.

He said that information about the species, its importance and uses could accompany the aquarium and serve to educate the public visiting the PDA Building.

Those invited to attend the aquaculture summit included owners of licensed facilities, those who could potentially serve on a state aquacultural advisory board, related

state agency representatives and interested legislators, as well as representatives of Penn State University, University of Pennsylvania, and University of Delaware, among others.

While the majority of those participating represented fish-raising businesses, there was some representation of aquatic plant producers.

Leading the concerns of the group in 1993 was bird and animal predation of fish at the facilities.

That continues. Bird predation has long been a problem and has cost the industry much in lost production.

While it was common practice years ago for birds, such as herons, that had become habitual predators at fish-raising facilities to be shot. Federal protections and fines had largely stopped that practice since.

However, according to audience testimony, while the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has and does issue permits for killing troublesome birds, the state Game Commission has to co-sign on the permit in order to grant complete authority to kill certain bird species.

The group complained that, while the rest of the agricultural sector is allowed to kill crop damaging animals such as deer (protected by the Game Commission through hunting rules and regulations), the aquaculture industry has been prevented from doing so, primarily because neither the federal government, nor the state, specifically recognizes aquaculture as an agricultural practice.

It was reported that the Game Commission, which didn't have a representative present and couldn't be contacted for comment prior to presstime, has ruled that because aquaculture isn't included in the official state definition of agriculture, it isn't afforded the same right to destroy crop-damaging animals.

Further, previously proposed legislation to define aquaculture as a branch of agriculture and help develop the industry stalled and had to be reintroduced.

More recently proposed legislation (Senate Bill 283) would bring legal and state policy consideration of aquaculture as agriculture. Successful passage of that legislation, or something similar, is sought by the group.

Without it, those in aquaculture are forced to pay some taxes not required by traditional agriculture, are not afforded work vehicle consideration by PennDOT, and they do not receive the same promotional support as other sectors.

Of second priority was the availability of drugs and therapeutants for the industry.

For example, while some medicines are available to those raising trout and salmon species, labeling was not done for warm water fishes, such as hybrid striped bass.

While those raising trout can purchase and use some drugs over the counter, those raising other species must secure a prescription from a veterinarian in order to use the same drug. That adds considerably to operating costs and decreases profitability.

Further, disease testing support needs to be determined, and expanded if possible, to help the industry.

The state should also develop a fish health certification program so that Pennsylvania aquacultural producers can better meet growing demands for health certification by other states and nations.

It was reported that while diagnostic services by the state laboratory are good, but should be expanded, that once a disease or health problem has been discovered through diagnostic testing, there is no bank of expertise to provide growers with solution advice.

Veterinary support for the industry is very limited, and some in south central Pennsylvania are forced to use out-of-state services.

The Fish Commission was invited to be represented, though it was not. The Commission in the past had offered disease testing services to the rest of the state's aquaculture industry, as did the federal Fish and Wildlife agency. They both stopped that practice three years ago.

Without time to adjust to the lack of testing facilities and expertise, it became difficult for private business to market fish out of state.

At the time, New York's similar trout production was devastated prior to its April opening of trout season because whirling disease — a disease affecting the brains of fish.

New York had banned accepting fish in its borders unless assured that they were tested and certified as being free of whirling disease.

In quick response, the state PDA diagnostic laboratory staff, especially Dr. Fred Rommel, developed and got approved a test for whirling disease. That enabled Pennsylvania producers to be able to certify the disease-free status of fish stocks and then qualify to sell and ship trout to New York in time for its trout season opening day.

In the meantime, however, support of the aquaculture industry by PDA was dampened.

The industry had manned a 12-member PDA aquacultural advisory board, though the board was dismantled under former state Secretary of Agriculture Charles Brosius, whom Hayes replaced.

Additional development of tests to help the aquacultural industry comply with growing health-certification restrictions was not done.

Water quality issues remained next in importance, in comparison to 1993 priorities.

While the 1993 effort and follow-up determined that a general permit should and could be developed to allow aquacultural facilities to discharge used water into the state's waterways.

While much of the work in developing the general permit has been done through effort with the state Department of Environmental Protection, it did not receive more effort in recent years.

Part of the issue deals with the fact that most of the state's trout-production facilities are located at the headwaters of the state's best quality streams.

Since the facilities were constructed before the streams received additional protections from degradation of water quality, and never had to qualify for a permit to discharge waste water into the streams, the industry has sought grandfathering existing facilities.

The streams received the high quality status with the existing aquaculture facilities already in place and discharging effluent, therefore it has been agreed that they should receive such grandfathering status, it was reported.

But while the development of a general NPDES permit was nearing final stages, it apparently became shelved in the meantime.

The last several issues of concern to the industry were shifted around in importance.

The priorities for 1993 listed quality assurance as the next important issue, but since the federal guidelines for all meat safety processing have been since developed in the HACCP program, the issue is still important, but it was decided that the industry needed better adoption and information to deal with the issue, not necessarily more government assistance.

Instead the issue of water allocations and consumptive uses of water was moved higher on the list.

Growing water demands has created more battling over water resources, and groundwater withdrawals or diversions have proven to be a source of consternation.

While the Susquehanna River Basin Commission and the Delaware River Basin Commission both register water uses and oversee the approval of groundwater withdrawals, it was said that more of Pennsylvania's aquacultural users should register their uses with the federal-state compact agencies, so as to ensure a record of their historic water uses against future claims.

Non-native, also called non-indigenous species, are also of major concern. Bans and restrictions on raising varieties needs to be addressed better, so that aquaculturalists in the state can take advantage of opportunities to pursue new technologies developed in raising different species.

It was reported that such activities as raising freshwater flounder is being done, but not in Pennsylvania. There are other species of potential, such as a freshwater prawn (shrimp), but creating a clear, quick pathway for resolving issues of handling non-native species needs to be created.

While dangers to native and naturalized species from the accidental introduction of non-native species that could out-compete and destroy native aquatic life are very real, the issue needs a better mechanism for dealing with it.

The Fish Commission has much control over the introduction and propagation of non-native aquatic species, even though it continues to stock and introduce non-native species, such as the muskellunge, and brown and rainbow trout.

Wetlands protection continues to be a big issue for aquaculture since many facilities were developed at natural spring sites and lie in wetlands and in floodplains.

Apparently, general maintenance of fish-raising ponds could cause a number of agencies to enforce wetlands and wetlands species protection laws.

Though a complete summary of the day's discussions are to be compiled and published by PDA, among the issues receiving the consensus of the group was that it would request that Secretary Hayes reinstate an aquacultural advisory board; seek passage of legislation defining aquaculture as agriculture; pursue the passage of DEP regulations for the general permitting of aquaculture discharge; seek cooperation by the state Game Commission in allowing the killing of habitual predatory birds (individual birds can and have learned to bypass various protective devices from screening to electrified screening) causing crop damage (losses); and to seek to continue to meet more regularly, such as perhaps once every two months, to devote more time to each of the issues.