



Calcasieu Oyster Reefs on a Comeback After Removal of Dredges

While the rest of the State suffers from disturbing decline, leadership by Rep. Stephen Dwight and CCA is having a positive effect on Big Lake



In a report presented to the Wildlife and Fisheries Commission in August, LDWF biologists said that **Calcasieu Lake oysters saw a 50% increase in total abundance in 2018 over 2017**. This is a far cry from reports of previous years which saw oyster abundance in Big Lake suffer about a 90% decrease since 2003.

So what's made the difference? There are likely numerous factors, but the most notable difference during the 2017-18 oyster season was the **removal of oyster dredges (or scrapers) as the primary means of harvest**. Oyster dredges are intended to scrape the oysters off of the reef substrate at a faster rate but many times during that harvest the reef material is removed along with the oyster. Over time that results in a loss of elevation of that reef material and in most cases a reduced capacity to sustain oyster development year after year.

In 2017, after years of declining oyster abundance and the threat of a totally closed 2017-18 oyster season in Calcasieu, **Representative Stephen Dwight of Lake Charles teamed up with Coastal Conservation Association of Louisiana to pass House Bill 156, prohibiting the use of dredges / scrapers in Calcasieu and Sabine Lakes**, and allowing hand-tonging as the only means of harvest.

Since then, oyster abundance in Calcasieu appears to have started to rebound. In fact, this apparent turnaround in abundance was enough for the **Wildlife and Fisheries Commission to increase the daily sack limit in Calcasieu from 7 sacks in 2017-18 to 10 sacks for the upcoming 2018-19 season, in an effort to achieve the projected harvest target**.

"While we are only a year into it, and we still have a long way to go for the reefs to fully recover, the early results on the removal of dredges from Big Lake certainly seem positive," said CCA Louisiana Executive Director David Cresson. "Healthy, vertical oyster reefs are critical to our estuaries. They serve a number of important functions, from filtering the water, to providing habitat and food for marine species, to slowing down wave action that batters our shorelines. Scrapers, by design, flatten and spread the reefs. Removing them has been a positive move for the reefs and the oyster fleet."

Passing H.B.156 was not easy, as it was met by severe opposition by many in the oyster industry. But because of this new law, the fleet enjoyed a season in 2017-18 and will do so again in 2018-19 with more oysters available and a more liberal sack limit. Cresson says that was always the goal.

"CCA said from the beginning that we want to see a thriving, prosperous oyster fleet in Big Lake, because that indicates a healthy and abundant oyster stock," he said. "When the oyster reefs are healthy and productive, it's good for everyone."

Calcasieu Lake is 100% Public Oyster Grounds, meaning there are no oyster leases in the Lake. And while the news on Big Lake is positive, there is a much gloomier outlook on the rest of the State's public oyster grounds, where dredging is still allowed. The LDWF report noted that **Calcasieu was the only public oyster area in the State to see an increase in oyster abundance in 2018 over 2017**. In fact, biologists from Wildlife and Fisheries describe the **overall oyster population on Louisiana's public grounds as the "lowest stock size ever recorded."**

PUBLIC OYSTER AREA	Total Availability (barrels)	% increase / decrease
Lake Borgne / MS Sound	79,984	-23%
East of MS River, South of MRGO	674	-90%
Hackberry Bay	3538	-60%
Lake Chien / Felicity	452	-35%
Sister Lake / Bay Junop / Lake Menchant	70,507	-20%
CALCASIEU	111,703	+50%
TOTAL	283,431	-6%

GREEN indicates INCREASE over 2017 levels. RED indicates DECREASE.

Quick Facts: **LOWEST** stock size ever recorded in Louisiana.
 Availability is 91% **BELOW** long-term average
 Most reefs degraded / lost in most areas open to seed harvest.

Info from LDWF 2018 Oyster Stock Assessment, Public Oyster Areas of Louisiana, 8/2/18

"It's sad what has happened to the state's public oyster grounds. They have been absolutely dragged to death, and there is no denying it," said Cresson. "Perhaps we should learn a lesson from what's going on in Big Lake and consider similar tactics to stop the decimation of these reefs in other areas."

CCA will keep our members posted on this issue.

Click here to view [LDWF's 2018 Oyster Stock Assessment- Public Oyster Areas of Louisiana](#)

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