Aquaculture in Rhode Island 2024

Oyster farmer in the Portsmouth Cove inspects a bottom cage. Photograph: Breakwater Oyster Co..

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Oyster farmer harvests from barge in Ninigret Pond**.**
Photograph: Katie Martin, Ocean State Shellfish Coop.

Rhode Island Aquaculture Industry - 2024

At a Glance

- The overall number of individual aquaculture sites in Rhode Island increased by five for a total of 89 sites.

- The total area now under cultivation increased by 8.22 acres for a total of 392.54 acres.

- Oysters remained the number one aquaculture product with 11,595,512 pieces sold for consumption.

- The farm gate value of aquaculture products for consumption was $7,991,493.

- Oyster seed sales from RI aquaculturists were valued at $804,000.

- Combined farm gate value of aquaculture products for consumption and seed sales was $8,795,493.

- USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service worked with RI growers to purchase and deploy a record number of approximately 1,638,043 oysters to restoration sites throughout the coastal ponds and Narragansett Bay.

- The total number of aquaculture farm workers employed in 2024 was 198.

Introduction

2024 was a banner year for RI aquaculture with increases in oyster production and overall value surpassing all previous years since record keeping began in 1995. The overall acreage in production increased slightly as well with an additional 8.22 acres added. Farmers continued to work on raising new crops such as sugar kelp, soft shell clams, surf clams, and bay scallops, though the focus remains firmly on eastern oysters. RI aquaculturists are inventive, efficient, and working to diversify their crops and markets using the latest technology.

Figure 1. Oyster farmers working floating cages off Rome Point.
Photograph: West Passage Oyster Co.

How the figures were derived

Harvest figures came from the yearly CRMC aquaculture questionnaire distributed to all leaseholders. All reports are taken as an accurate value. Monetary figures for this report were calculated by averaging an estimated yearly average wholesale price from multiple sources. This figure was then multiplied by the numbers reported by growers in the yearly CRMC report to arrive at the figures used in this report. Figures from the aquaculture-associated industries came from the principals involved in these privately held companies. Oyster sales for consumption continue to dominate the industry though five operations also sold oyster seed to other farms in 2024. Other species continue to gain traction, though only five operations reported Sugar Kelp sales, two reported bay scallops sales, and two reported quahog sales. The figures cited are for gross sales of all aquaculture-related products, including seed sales. Several shellfish growers are also shellfish dealers. The sales that are direct to end users are at a higher value than wholesale price used in the averaging. Using a wholesale price results in a lower value determined for the aquaculture products but also results in a consistency of format over the years of reporting.

Figure 2. Sugar kelp crop in the Harbor of Refuge, Point Judith.
Photograph: Oliver Dixon

Farm Production

The 2024 farm gate value of all Rhode Island grown aquaculture products was $8,795,493, which was an increase of 9.37 percent over the 2023 farm gate value and the highest ever recorded since 1995. Oyster seed sales for 2024 were also up 4.41 percent to $804,000. Notably, sugar kelp sales quadrupled from $22,500 to $91,520, representing the best harvest year ever for species in Rhode Island.

The number of active aquaculture farms in Rhode Island at the end of 2024 was 89, with cultivation of 392.54 acres. Eastern oysters, *Crassostrea virginica*, continue to be the most valuable cultivated species in Rhode Island waters and represent approximately 99 percent of all Rhode Island aquaculture production.

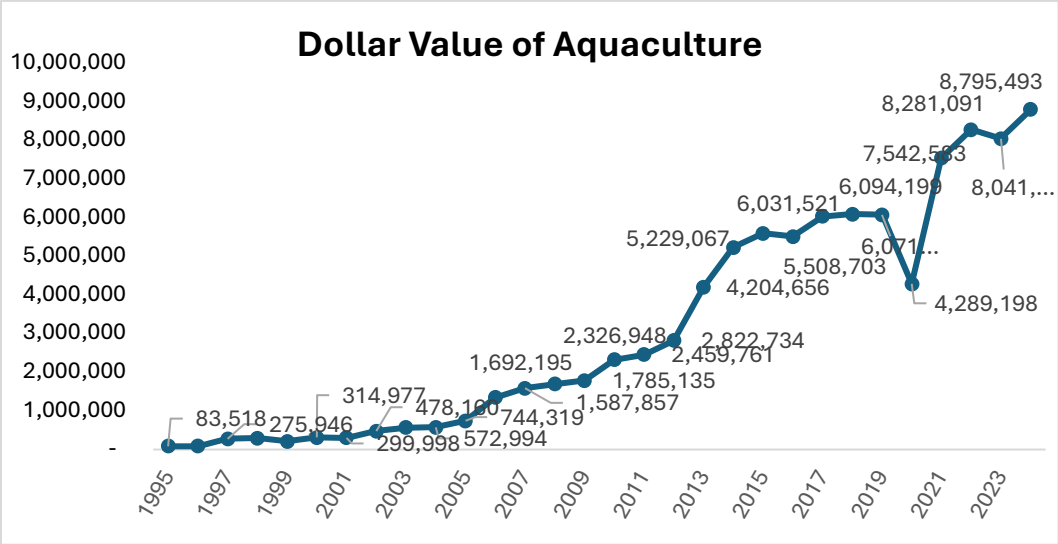

Figure 3. *Total dollar value of all aquaculture products*

Aquaculture Employment

Year	Full Time Year	Full Time Season	Part Time Year	Part Time Season	Total
2006	17	8	17	15	57
2007	14	2	28	15	61
2008	12	1	25	24	62
2009	14	3	25	20	62
2010	17	4	30	28	79
2011	23	3	26	32	84
2012	32	9	32	32	105
2013	35	13	37	42	127
2014	47	17	35	43	142
2015	47	26	39	59	171
2016	49	30	49	49	177
2017	62	27	41	64	194
2018	62	31	38	69	200
2019	59	47	46	67	219
2020	69	20	52	75	216
2021	69	36	52	65	222
2022	76	45	53	72	246
2023	81	34	52	61	228
2024	69	51	32	46	198

Figure 4. *Aquaculture farm jobs decreased by 13.15% in 2024*

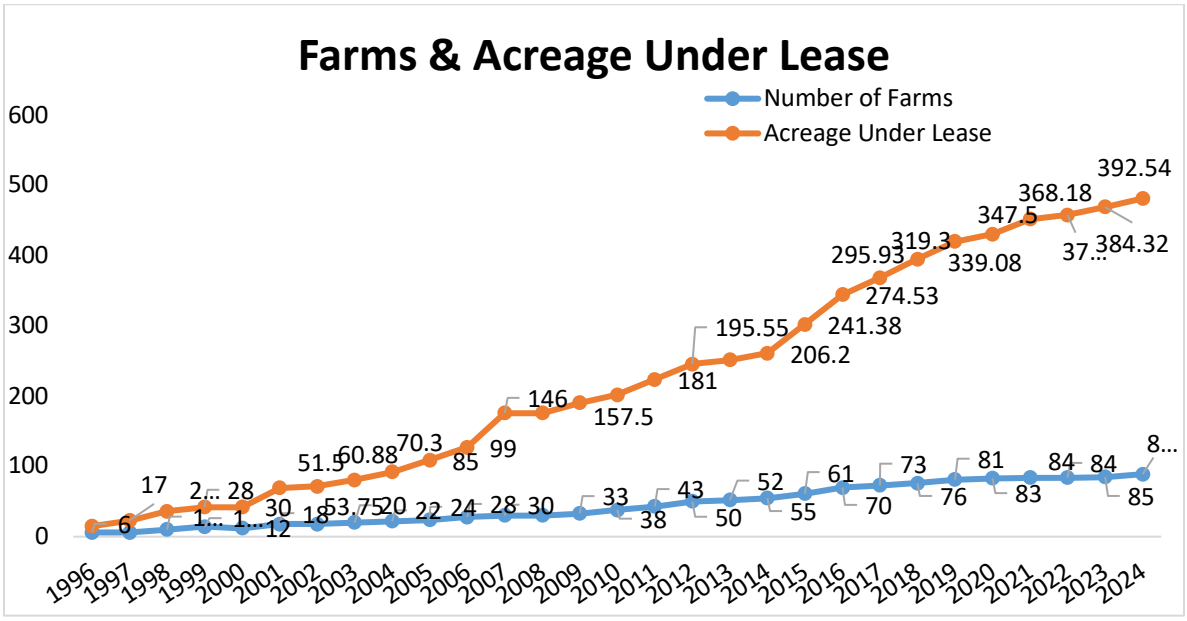

Figure 5. *The acreage for the 89 farm sites in 2024 was 392.54 acres.*

Figure 6. Aquaculture Extension Specialist, Prof. Abdelrahman, of RWU inspects shellfish at the university's research site with students.

Universities, Environmental Organizations, State and Federal Agencies

Two educational institutions conduct aquaculture research activities, extension programs, and academic programs in Rhode Island. Both Roger Williams University (RWU) and the University of Rhode Island (URI) are centers of excellence in the field of aquaculture. Both universities have pathology testing capabilities and are assets to the shellfish aquaculture and wild harvest industries. URI also houses the USDA/ARS oyster breeding program which is supported by a hatchery located in Wakefield. As part of this program, URI works with scientists at the NOAA/NMFS Lab in Milford, Connecticut, and industry partners to spawn 100 lines of oysters to be grown out in five states. The goal is to identify lines with the best resistance to disease that are also adapted to regional differences in temperature. New genetic tools will help geneticists identify traits associated with specific genes, which will speed up the process of selective breeding. Extension projects at RWU include a shellfish research program complete with a hatchery, nursery and farm site, and a public enhancement project for quahogs and oysters partnering with the RI Shellfishermen's Association and the Town of Warren. Rhode Island Sea Grant (RISG) continues to provide aquaculture education opportunities for interested constituents. The RI Department of Environmental Management (DEM) partners with CRMC, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Natural Resources Conservation Service, and the aquaculture industry on oyster reef restoration projects. In 2024, USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service worked with growers to purchase and deploy approximately 1,638,043 oysters to restoration sites around the state. The RIDEM and the RI Department of Health continue to monitor harmful algal concentrations and the program has successfully protected human health. The USDA continues to fund the shellfish sentinel program looking at shellfish disease levels in the different biosecurity zones throughout the state.

Outlook for 2025

2024 was a strong year for Rhode Island aquaculturists and, even though there was a slight dip in production the previous year, the overall projection for 2025 is likewise strong. The demand for sustainably grown shellfish continues to increase both locally and nationally and Rhode Island growers have invested in strategies and technologies to meet that demand while improving operational efficiencies and shellfish safety. Many farmers remain optimistic that strong demand for sustainably grown RI aquaculture products, both locally and throughout the country, will only continue into 2025 and beyond.

Figure 7. Aquaculture vessel harvesting in Narragansett Bay
Photograph: West Passage Oyster Co.