



RHODE ISLAND
DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT
DIVISION OF MARINE FISHERIES/DIVISION OF FISH AND WILDLIFE
3 Fort Wetherill Road
Jamestown, Rhode Island 02835

June 3, 2026

Benjamin Goetsch
Aquaculture Coordinator
Coastal Resources Management Council
4808 Tower Hill Road
Wakefield, RI 02879

Re: Cedar island Oyster Co #2004-05-024

Dear Mr. Goetsch:

The Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management (the Department), through the Division of Fish and Wildlife (DFW) and Division of Marine Fisheries (DMF), has received and reviewed the application submitted by John and Cindy West of Cedar Island Oyster Company. This application is for a gear modification of their existing 15.5-acre aquaculture lease for adding seven horizontal floating lines, each containing 500 low-profile baskets (FlipFarm) per line, within a 3-acre area of the existing lease in Point Judith Pond in South Kingstown, Rhode Island. This 3-acre section of the current lease is permitted for bottom cages with the remainder of the assent being permitted only for bottom plant of the Eastern American Oyster (*Crassostrea virginica*) with harvest methods of dredge and bull rake. The applicants state that if approved, they will still retain single trawl line of over 500' of bottom gear to be used for submersion of market sized oysters to address potential campylobacter contamination.

The lease would be accessed by boat, and there would be a line just under the strings of floating baskets to help propel the boat while working the lease. The farm would be visited daily to monitor the gear and biweekly to engage with the gear throughout the year.

Given the existence of the site already, DMF believes that the adverse impacts to marine fisheries and their habitat from this prospective gear modification would be minimal. As such, the DMF does not have objections to this application. The DMF's acceptance of the current proposal is specific to the location (provided by the coordinates) and specifications outlined in the application.

While impacts to marine species and habitat are expected to be minimal, this area of Point Judith Pond is classified as a high-use area for dabbling ducks during both the breeding and wintering seasons, including species such as American black duck, American wigeon, gadwall, and mallard. Additionally, the area is classified as having a high likelihood of use by diving ducks and gulls during the winter months and geese, terns, and waders during the breeding season. The area immediately south of Beach Island is also classified as supporting high breeding-season bird diversity across multiple waterbird taxa. These classifications and spatial predictions are based on waterbird survey data collected by the University of Rhode Island and analyzed by Bakner et al. (2025) throughout Rhode Island coastal waters.

The proposed lease is also situated in close proximity to Galilee Bird Sanctuary, located within Point Judith Pond. Galilee Bird Sanctuary is designated as a Globally Important Bird Area (IBA) by BirdLife International—one of only 720 such sites recognized in the United States. Galilee, together with the adjacent Succotash Marsh Wildlife Management Area, collectively provide critical breeding, staging, and migratory habitat for terns, shorebirds, and wading birds, which also use adjacent waters—in which the lease area is situated—for foraging and roosting (National Audubon Society, 2024).

American black ducks are a dabbling duck species that winters throughout coastal Rhode Island. Habitat loss and degradation have been identified as contributing factors to the long-term decline of the species during the second half of the twentieth century. Populations within the Atlantic Flyway have continued to decline in recent decades and the species is of conservation concern in eastern North America. Based on data summarized in the *2026 Winter Waterfowl Survey Summary* (RIDEM, 2026), steep declines were observed in the mean number of American black ducks counted per survey site, while similar downward trends were also documented for several other dabbling duck species that winter in the state (Figure 1).

Research conducted in Rhode Island by Mezebish Quinn et al. (2024) found that black ducks preferentially used areas classified as suitable for aquaculture expansion relative to areas considered unsuitable for expansion. Continued expansion of aquaculture into habitats preferred by species such as the black duck may increase the potential for interactions between aquaculture operations and this disturbance-sensitive species.

Wading birds, including the Great Blue Heron, Snowy Egret, and Great Egret, are regularly observed in shallow coastal waters of Rhode Island throughout much of the year. Bakner et al. (2025) found all three of these species showed significantly higher probability of occurrence in areas classified as most suitable for aquaculture development. This spatial overlap suggests that continued expansion of shellfish aquaculture into shallow nearshore areas will increasingly bring operational activity into direct proximity of these disturbance-sensitive species.

American black ducks, in addition to the other dabbling duck species known to use this area, are unlikely to experience direct negative interactions with the aquaculture gear proposed in this application. However, the addition of floating gear and boat traffic may

contribute to localized disturbance or shifts in habitat use within the immediate vicinity of the lease.

Terns, gulls, shorebirds, and wading birds present a distinct set of interactions with floating aquaculture gear. Floating oyster cage and bag systems are well-documented as roost substrates for these species (Comeau et al., 2009; Cunningham et al., 2023; Bakner et al., 2025) which require secure roost sites to maintain the energy balance necessary for migration and breeding- when their physiological demands are highest. Floating structures in shallow estuarine environments such as Point Judith Pond can function as de facto high-tide roosts, offering elevated perch sites in close proximity to intertidal foraging habitat and outside the reach of terrestrial predators. However, active aquaculture operations generate repeated disturbance at these same structures, with studies suggesting each disturbance event to migratory shorebirds may result in energetic expenditures equivalent to 3-4 days of foraging effort (Cheng et al., 2025). The proximity of the proposed lease to Galilee Bird Sanctuary and Succotash Marsh amplifies the potential significance of this effect, as both sites support substantial concentrations of terns and shorebirds during spring and fall migration and the breeding season.

Given the high use of this area by dabbling ducks and other waterbirds and the relatively close proximity to Beach Island (shallower water), the DFW believe that the proposed modification is expected to result in moderate impacts associated with localized disturbance and changes in habitat use within the immediate vicinity of the lease. Where floating gear is not effectively deterring bird use, the energetic cost of repeated displacement from roost sites during these periods is well-documented and cumulative (Cheng et al., 2025). This cost is most consequential during spring migration (April–May), fall migration (July–October), and the breeding season (May–August). The applicant should consider the frequency of disturbance at high tide during these periods, recognizing that floating gear in a roost-limited estuarine environment has the potential, absent effective deterrents, to attract birds and subject them to repeated energetic stress through operational periods.

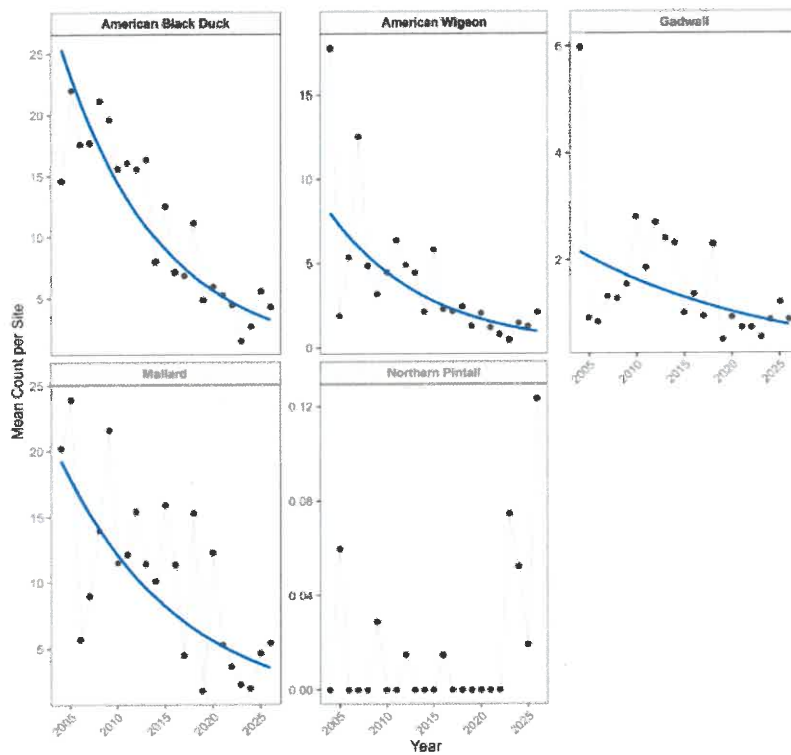


Figure 1. Mean count per site for five focal dabbling duck species (American Black Duck, American Wigeon, Gadwall, Mallard, and Northern Pintail) observed during Rhode Island mid-winter waterfowl surveys, 2004– 2026. Points represent annual mean counts per site, and solid lines indicate significant trends from linear models applied to annual mean counts per survey section.

Please contact Anna Gerber-Williams with any questions.

Sincerely,

Jason E. McNamee

Jason McNamee, PhD
Deputy Director, Bureau of Natural Resources

Literature Cited:

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