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On April 11, 2016, U.S. Senator Ben Cardin (D-Md.), a senior member of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, met with oyster farmers and toured Morgan State University’s innovative Patuxent Environmental & Aquatic Research Laboratory (PEARL), where an oyster aquaculture program could help fuel the expansion of Maryland’s promising oyster aquaculture industry.

Morgan State University recently received a grant from the Department of Commerce to increase economic development and job creation for a sustainable oyster aquaculture industry. The aquaculture program at the PEARL was developed to help build a sustainable oyster aquaculture industry in Maryland. The grant helped initiate the restarting of production at MSU PEARL’s hatchery to support the industry in the short term and to assist in hatchery development in the long term.

The oyster aquaculture industry in Maryland is new, vital, ambitious, and innovative, but it is also hamstrung by a shortage of oyster larvae/spat necessary to support its growth as an industry. Maryland oyster farmers are at an increasing disadvantage to Virginia farmers as the demand for hatchery product continues to swell within Virginia’s aquaculture industry.

Oyster hatcheries play a central role in creating a reliable supply of oyster larvae and/or oyster spat for use by the industry. Nearly 50 years ago, it was the development of hatchery technologies on the U.S. Pacific Coast that opened the door to the sustainable farming of oysters, rather than the traditional reliance on the vagaries of nature to furnish wild spat for farmers. The advent of hatcheries also paved the way for selective breeding and development of particular genetic lineages of oysters that feature superior characteristics for farming applications.

In Virginia, there are currently six large-scale commercial hatcheries as well as two research hatcheries. In comparison, Maryland has no commercial hatcheries. In this climate, Maryland aquaculture farmers are becoming increasingly desperate for sources of oyster larvae/spat needed to grow their businesses. “Maryland’s oyster aquaculture industry holds great promise for providing delicious oysters, good jobs in rural areas and significant environmental benefits, and I am proud to continue fighting for its growth,” said Senator Cardin. “The lab also provided the perfect backdrop for my latest conversation with oyster farmers from Southern Maryland and the Eastern Shore, whose entrepreneurial spirits are matched only by their enthusiasm for extending Maryland’s reputation for first-class seafood.”
“It’s clear that the year-round harvests made possible by oyster aquaculture are proving to be a vital part of the modern formula for success on Maryland’s working waterfronts,” said Senator Cardin. “I’m excited to see the direct benefits that oyster farming is having on rural small businesses, but I’m also excited to hear that the environmental benefits of establishing oyster farming operations are so immediately apparent. The Bucks are seeing the best water quality in recent memory around their oyster farms, and that’s leading to new seagrasses taking root. They’re healing the Chesapeake Bay and making a living at the same time, which is an incredible win-win scenario for us all.”

Morgan State University is one of the nation’s Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU). Morgan State is a coeducational institution, located in a residential section of northeast Baltimore, Maryland. The campus covers an area of more than 143 acres. The University offers a comprehensive range of academic programs through the doctorate.

MSU PEARL is located near the Patuxent River (part of the Chesapeake Bay watershed) in Saint Leonard, Maryland. The mission of the PEARL is to provide society with the knowledge to solve its environmental challenges through research, education and economic development. MSU PEARL applies interdisciplinary approaches to studying the connections between complex ecological systems. Founded in 1967 by The Academy of Natural Sciences and located in Benedict, Maryland, the laboratory moved to current facility in St. Leonard, Maryland, in 1994, and became part of Morgan State University in September 2004.

As the state's primary economic development agency, the Maryland Department Commerce (DoC) stimulates private investment and creates jobs by attracting new businesses, encouraging the expansion and retention of existing companies, and providing workforce training and financial assistance to Maryland companies. The Department also promotes the state's many economic advantages and markets local products and services at home and abroad to spur economic development and international investment, trade and tourism.

Since 2010, DoC has assisted nearly 4,000 small businesses and organizations; helped create or retain 40,000 jobs, and leveraged nearly $3 billion in private investment. Companies such as Amazon, Discovery Communications, Johns Hopkins Medical, Legg Mason, Millennial Media, Under Armour and Volvo Powertrain have recently located or expanded in Maryland.