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Climate change impacts unite U.S. shellfish farmers

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By Lauren Kramer

Shellfish Growers Climate Coalition to take a bottom-up policy-changing strategy



The Shellfish Growers Climate Coalition aims to spread public awareness about climate change and its impact on their businesses and to impact policymaking surrounding climate change. Photo courtesy of Mook Sea Farms.

The Shellfish Growers Climate Coalition, an initiative of seven founding U.S. aquaculture farmers, last week launched a partnership with **The Nature Conservancy** (<https://www.nature.org/ourinitiatives/urgentissues/oceans/providing-food-sustainably/index.htm?intc3=nature.oceans.jp.r1c1>). (TNC) to spread public awareness about climate change and its impact on their businesses. Their ultimate goal is to promote and enact climate policies that will lead to a low-carbon future.

The man behind the coalition's birth is **Bill Mook** (<https://www.aquaculturealliance.org/advocate/maine-oyster-farmer-stares-down-climate-change/>), president of Mook Sea Farm. He felt he could no longer mitigate, adapt and buffer the impact of climate change without trying to address and change its root cause.

"Being in the shellfish business, we're on the front lines of climate change impact," he said. "We were wrestling with our larvae production due to ocean acidification, we're seeing more costly closures of our harvest due to increased precipitation and the increasing seawater temperature is effecting contamination of shellfish with *Vibrio* bacteria, which can be pathogenic to humans if the shellfish are not treated correctly. Between all these and the disruption caused by storms like Superstorm Sandy, I realized all our mitigation efforts are heading in the wrong direction because we were doing nothing to correct the root cause of climate change."

Mook contacted six colleagues and started conversations with Taylor Shellfish, Hog Island, Hama Hama, Island Creek Fishers Island and Rappahannock that resulted in the TNC partnership and the formation of the coalition. Bill Dewey, director of public affairs for Taylor Shellfish, said the company was keen to participate.



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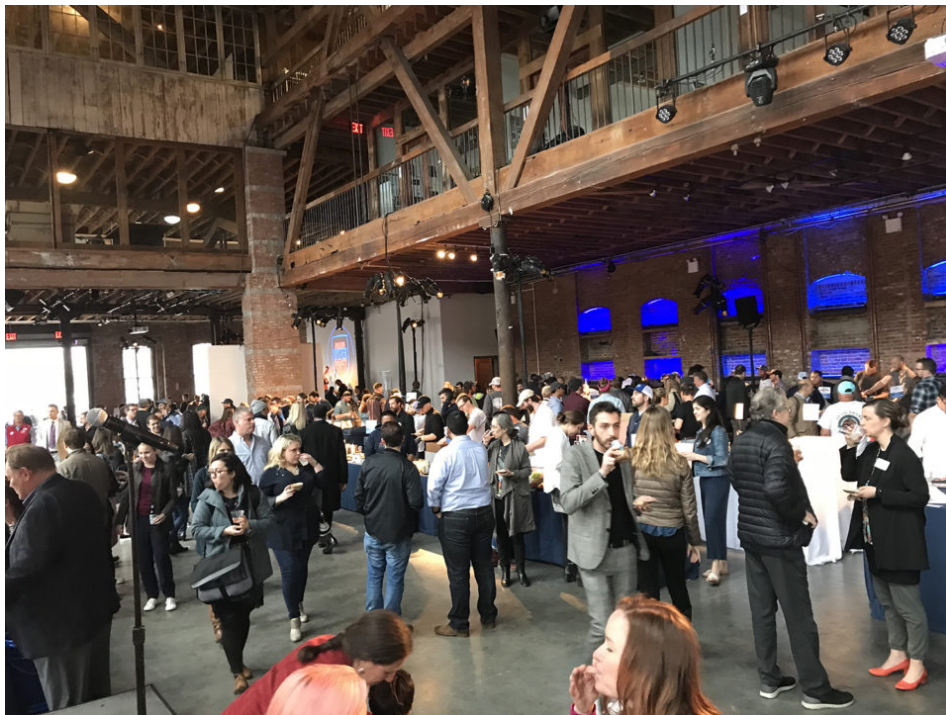
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“We knew Bill Mook was onto something because as a company we’ve been impacted by ocean acidification. We’re finding ways for now to work around it but it feels like the ultimate solution to the problem is addressing a carbon solution,” Dewey said. “We need to make the public aware of the impact on our business and industries of climate change because it’s a way to help effect the policies we need to change.”



The Shellfish Growers Climate Coalition was launched at the Billion Oyster Party April in Brooklyn, N.Y., on April 27. There are at least six more growers interested in joining the coalition, she added. Photo courtesy of The Nature Conservancy.

The Nature Conservancy has chapters in all 50 states and will help connect the growers in the states where they’re doing business with state-level policy makers.

“When there are opportunities to engage on the federal level, we’ll be there too,” said Sally McGee, northeast marine program director at TNC. “This is a long-term thing and the growers recognize that in order to make any change, action needs to be taken now. Their role will be to help educate at oyster festivals, and also to be a voice when we have the opportunity to speak to legislators. In some cases, there will be new activities for them, like going to a state capital, and in others, activities where they’re already playing a featured role, just adding to their message about the climate impacts they’re experiencing.”

Mook specifically sought out TNC because of the organization's involvement at state level.

"The strategy is not to spend too much time at the federal level where there are lower odds of making an impact. Rather, make people understand that climate change is an urgent problem, start at the lower state levels and work your way up. We want to apply pressure from beneath to effect federal change," he said.

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McGee said TNC has a working budget of approximately \$200,000 dedicated to the Shellfish Growers Climate Coalition. Even prior to its launch at the **Billion Oyster Party** (<https://www.aquaculturealliance.org/advocate/ailing-waterways-hail-the-oysters-return/>). April in New York City April 27, there are at least six more growers interested in joining the coalition, she added.

"With a large coalition of shellfish growers, our hope is that others who are interested in having this viable food product, like restaurants and wholesalers, will expand the circle in the United States and hopefully have impacts in other countries as well," said McGee. "The Nature Conservancy works in 80 countries and climate change is a high priority for us – it's at the top of the list."



Photo courtesy of The Nature Conservancy.

Mook hopes that the shellfish growers will ignite change in other food sectors and build a coalition that includes craft breweries, supermarkets and any business involved in food supply.

“In my opinion this coalition will only be successful if it can be expanded beyond shellfish growers,” he said. “That’s how you create a constituency of businesses whose collective will helps put pressure on local and state governments, and ultimately at the federal level.”

He initiated this coalition with the hope of creating a brighter future but Mook knows it won’t happen overnight.

“If energy policy can change – not just in the United States but everywhere – and we start soon to reduce carbon emissions, then it won’t get as bad as it might otherwise, or put us out of business,” he said. “I’m hopeful there’ll be impact in my lifetime but to a large extent I’m doing this for my children and grandchildren, and everyone else’s. When our country comes together for a common purpose it’s an almost unstoppable force. My hope is that someone will come up with a clear goal that will energize people over this climate issue, a goal that’s inspirational, but achievable.”

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