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With oyster nursery, San Diego steps toward aquaculture

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By Clare Leschin-Hoar

New Oyster Nursery Research Project part of broader initiative



The newly launched Oyster Nursery Research Project in the Port of San Diego will be using molded oyster baskets from SEAPA, an Australian company.

The waters off the United States' eighth-largest city may seem an unlikely place to grow oysters, but in a surprise announcement last month, officials from the Port of San Diego (Calif.) said they're aiming to do just that.

Hungry locals shouldn't expect to see "Grown in San Diego Bay" oysters at raw bars anytime soon – the focus here will be on nursery production. To start, a small amount of purchased hatchery oysters will be grown from seed (3 to 4 millimeters in size) to roughly the size of a quarter (20-25 mm), and tested against established health safety standards.

Port officials have identified six test sites within the bay for the project, with the goal of eventually scaling production to supply juvenile oysters to farms in Northern California and elsewhere for grow-out.

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"There's a market need for more juveniles," said Paula Sylvia, program manager of aquaculture for the Port – a demand that officials here say they're primed to meet.





Chairman Marshall Merrifield of the Board of Port Commissioners pulls one of the project's molded oyster baskets out of the water during a media gathering in December.

San Diego's warm ocean temperatures and nutrient-rich waters should result in substantially shorter growth cycles for juvenile oysters, cutting production time by as much as one year from those grown in colder northern waters.

"We think getting them to the desired size could take as little as three to four months," said Sylvia, adding the city's proximity to already established West Coast oyster farms is yet another competitive advantage.

Even at the nursery level, oysters produced in San Diego would have to pass through the state's rigorous public health guidelines for sanitation, as well as other layers of state and county ordinances before oysters could be sold to other farms.

The newly launched Oyster Nursery Research Project is part of a broader initiative, falling within the **Port's Blue Economy Incubator** program, attracting aquaculture entrepreneurs like Norm Abell of Acacia Pacific Aquaculture, LLC.

"The Port will be partners with private businesses to incubate good aquaculture ideas," said Abell. "I think the Port is looking in the right direction. San Diego could become a nationally recognized center for aquaculture technology."

The Port of San Diego has acted progressively in its hiring of aquaculture expert Sylvia. A spokesman with the American Association of Port Authorities was unaware of any other U.S. ports that have hired staff focused specifically on aquaculture ventures. Some ports report aquaculture activity, such as the Port of Los Angeles, home to offshore shellfish farm **Catalina Sea Ranch** (<https://catalinasearanch.com/>) (a partner of current Port tenant **AltaSea** (<https://altasea.org/>)); and the Port of Hueneme (the only deep-water harbor between Los Angeles and San Francisco Bay), which has set aside nearly four acres for aquaculture pursuits.

"Currently we have Stellar Biotechnologies at the site raising Key Hole Limpets used in immunotherapy research," said Port of Hueneme spokesman Will Berg.



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While the oyster nursery is the first aquaculture project to be launched by the Port of San Diego, it's unlikely to be the last. With approximately 6,000 acres of submerged and exposed tidelands and 34 miles of waterfront, there's plenty of potential to find space to nurture a thriving aquaculture industry.

"The Port has so many potential assets for these kinds of projects," said Abell. "It can enhance our working waterfront. It's a seafood system that will last long into the future, and move that supply back into a large, existing local marketplace. And it's complimentary to the commercial fishing heritage that has been here for so long."

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