

consuming raw or undercooked oysters greatly increases the risk of illness from these bacteria. *Vp* and *Vv* are more prevalent during warmer months when water temperatures are highest, which is why Georgia closes the oyster harvest season, annually. However, a study conducted in 2022 by UGA and CRD demonstrated that subtidal oysters harvested within two (2) hours and before 10:00a.m. during closed season minimized the risk of producing oysters with unsafe levels of *Vibrio*. The results of this study formed the basis of the 2025 Board rule.

Following rule adoption, existing oyster farmers were certified for closed season harvest. Fortunately, no *Vibrio*-related illnesses were reported in 2025. Simultaneously, an updated study by UGA and CRD suggested subtidal oysters can also be harvested safely during the closed season over longer periods of time; specifically, 30-minutes before sunrise until 10:00a.m., while utilizing best management practices for shading and cooling.

Following the successful 2025 closed season harvest and review of the new study, the Department finds the strict two (2) hour harvest window allowed for in the current rule can be expanded while minimizing *Vibrio* risks and associated concerns for public health.

Currently there are nine (9) leases within three (3) “mariculture zones” established exclusively for subtidal oyster farms. Closed season harvest requires additional certification by the Department and the expectation is that most farmers, if not all, farmers will meet certification criteria by 2027.

More information about the shellfish mariculture industry can be found at CoastalGaDNR.org/commercialshellfishharvest.

Purpose:

The purpose of the proposed rule amendment is to amend requirements for closed season shellfish mariculture by extending time of harvest from two (2) hours to 30 minutes before sunrise until 10:00a.m., while maintaining rigorous harvest controls during *Vibrio* control months. The proposed amendment is compliant with the National Shellfish Sanitation Program’s Model Ordinance, ensuring the public’s health is paramount.

Main Features:

This is an amendment to a rule adopted in 2025 that requires the Department to produce a Georgia *Vibrio* Control Plan annually and establishes the criteria for commercial shellfish harvest during an otherwise closed season. The amendment extends time/temperature control points for closed season harvest to allow harvesters additional time to harvest and land subtidal oysters before 10:00a.m.