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Love of oysters takes a toll on Humboldt Bay



Birds are silhouetted as the sun goes down at the Arcata Marsh and Wildlife Sanctuary in Arcata. **Renee C. Byer** Sacramento Bee file

BY JANE BRAXTON LITTLE

jbittle@dierpress.com

Humboldt Bay, one of the most productive bodies of water on the West Coast, is a place where the collision of three tectonic plates agitates land and water. Clashes are the norm. This one is over oysters and birds.

Birds have the most to lose.

A private company wants to more than double the area permitted for farming oysters. Coast Seafoods, which owns or leases 4,000 acres of potential oyster farming grounds in the bay, has proposed expanding its aquaculture from 300 acres to nearly 1,000 in the bay near Arcata. Based in Bellevue, Wash., the company has been harvesting local bivalves for decades, providing two-thirds of the oysters sold in California.

Audubon California is opposing the expansion. It threatens the 46 bird species dependent on the intertidal mudflats and eelgrass beds that make Humboldt Bay the most diverse area for shorebirds on the West Coast, said Anna Weinstein, Audubon's marine programs director.

Eelgrass, one of the rarest habitats in California, is especially vulnerable. The project would convert 5 percent of the state's beds from bird habitat to commercial oyster farming.

"It isn't good for birds, Dungeness crabs, recreation – you name it," Weinstein said.

In a quirk typical of the Triple Junction influence, the decision will not be made by state fish and wildlife officials. Instead it goes to the Humboldt Bay Harbor, Recreation and Conservation District, a local voter-approved body that oversees port development.

The oyster bed fight is creating strange bedfellows. Audubon, a national organization formed to oppose the mass slaughter of birds, is allied with Brant hunters, who want to protect birds so they can shoot them. Coast Seafoods, the company proposing increased industrial disturbance of the bay, is allied with Humboldt Baykeeper, formed in 2004 to safeguard the bay and prevent industrialization.

Less visible are alliances among groups that oppose despoiling the waters with more aquaculture but support a proposal for a railroad that could create a container shipping port in Humboldt Bay. Throw in allegations of conflict of interest by members of the Humboldt Bay Commission and it's a classic Humboldt trembler.

“This is California in the coastal zone. We’re ground zero for environmental controversy,” said Jack Crider, executive director of the Humboldt Bay Harbor District.

Aquaculture no longer uses vacuums to suck oysters from the bottoms of bays, a process that killed eelgrass. Today oyster farmers use long lines strung between PVC pipes embedded in the bottom of the bay. At high tide, they are completely submerged.

When the bay waters ebb, however, the pipes stick out like a copse of cluttered stumps. Boats, machines and increased human presence disturb the Dunlins and Marbled Godwits that depend on this bay.

Oyster farming is particularly bad for Black Brants, a sea goose that migrates from Baja California to nesting grounds in Alaska. Up to 60 percent of all Brants stop over in Humboldt Bay, and depend on the eelgrass as the mainstay of their highly specialized diet.

Audubon is not opposed to aquaculture, said Weinstein, but it is campaigning to reduce the footprint and relocate it to parts of the bay less critical to Brants. Humboldt Baykeepers, though supporting the Coast Seafoods proposal, also favors a smaller footprint.

“Six-hundred additional acres is just too big,” said Jennifer Kalt, the organization’s director.

The Humboldt Bay Commission should heed the advice of these organizations: Scale back the project and move it out of critical eelgrass areas. No one expects that decision to end the agitation endemic to the region, but the commission could claim it calmed the troubled waters – at least temporarily – by promoting both birds and a local industry.

Jane Braxton Little, a freelance writer, covers science, natural resources and rural Northern California from Plumas County.