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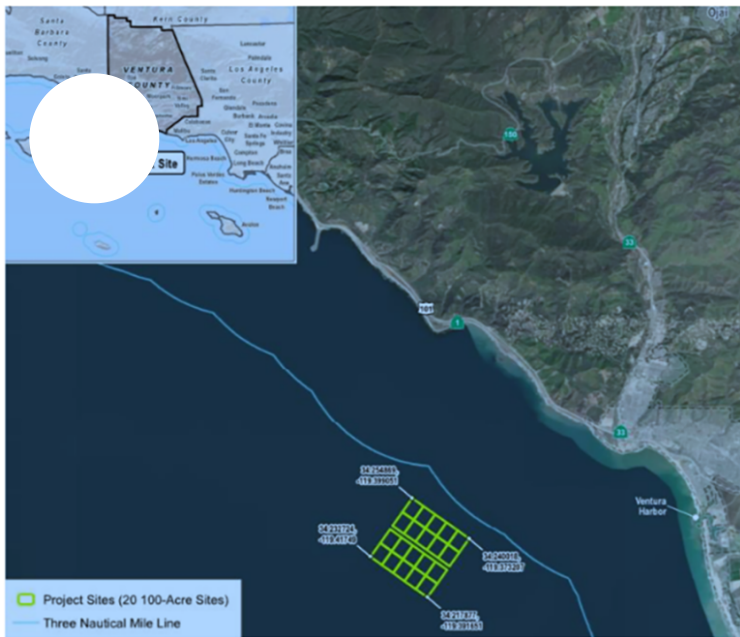
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Ventura Harbor tests the waters for shellfish zone

By [Marissa Nall](#) / Friday, July 24th, 2020 / [No Comments](#)



With the submission of a navigation risk assessment to the Army Corps of Engineers, the Ventura Shellfish Enterprise is one step closer to bringing aquaculture to the Santa Barbara Channel.

The effort has been in the works since 2017 to establish permits for fishing interests to lease 2,000 acres of water off the Ventura coast. The completion of the report puts the project on two concurrent tracks, said Brian Pendleton, the general manager of the Ventura Port District: outreach to the regional fishing industry to engage potential shellfish growers, as well as new data collection that will help shape U.S. Food and Drug Administration regulations.

The Ventura Shellfish Enterprise aims to open up access to shellfish production for the regional maritime industry, increasing the tonnage landed at Ventura Harbor and supporting its regular maintenance.

“Diversification of our fisheries would only strengthen our harbor and our economy,” Pendleton said.

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Mitigation measures include identifying aquaculture sites and equipment on navigational charts, eliminating slack lines in the system and submerging the projects to a depth of at least 15 feet. The projects are also designed to withstand 100-year storms, the report said, and will make use of ropes that sink, rather than float to the surface if dislodged.

The Ventura Port District, which owns and operates Ventura Harbor, has applied to extend the timeline of its 2018 Sea Grant award to continue the work into 2021, Pendleton said. Still on its to-do list are developing a permit assignment strategy and completing additional environmental review. An operations plan is expected to go back to the board in September, summarizing the terms and responsibilities of shellfish growers, the port district and other parties involved.

Meanwhile, the district has launched a pilot project in partnership with Goleta commercial aquaculture company The Cultured Abalone to gather data and establish a baseline for biotoxin regulations.

Like the permitting process, the sanitation program aims to minimize regulatory costs for shellfish producers, Pendleton said.

“This is a key area of the grant and it’s underway,” he said.

The project characterizes microalgae species of concern in the Santa Barbara Channel and tracks when and how strongly they occur in developing a plan for how to harvest and sell the products safely, said Cultured Abalone General Manager Doug Bush.

“When there’s a big bloom of a dangerous biotoxin presenting microalgae species, it’s important to recognize that,” Bush said, and be prepared to test shellfish tissue to determine when it’s safe to eat.

Biotoxin testing is standard for all bivalve shellfish, Bush said, but is highly location-specific. While there are several testing sites along the California coast, they are largely located at the shoreline on piers or marine data labs. The VSE project establishes an offshore dataset.

“It’s an additional puzzle piece in the landscape of harmful algal blooms,” Bush said. “The industry cannot exist without shellfish sanitation compliance and testing. It’s a key and necessary part of being able to do this. We’re trying to create a data landscape in advance so if we’re able to move forward ... it’ll make it more shovel-ready.”

Expanding the dataset meets another of the project’s goals, that of creating a rubric for future shellfish permitting in federal waters.

The VSE growing area is located in a region “where there is little historical data on the impacts of microalgae that produce toxic compounds,” said Ralph Imondi, executive director of Coastal Marine Biolabs, a science education nonprofit in Ventura Harbor. “To fill this knowledge gap, The VSE has been consulting with the FDA on a testing program to monitor the impacts of harmful microscopic algae in the growing area.”

CMB’s lab will conduct several types of tests on a monthly basis, Imondi said, including microscopic examinations of seawater samples for the presence of species of phytoplankton and diatoms.

The project, including the pilot and navigation risk assessment, aims to serve as model for future offshore efforts throughout the state.

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con it potential interference with their operations. The Ventura County Local Agency Formation Commission, which oversees boundaries for local governments and special districts, has also questioned the Port District's authority to approve leases in federal waters; discussions between the district and the commission are ongoing.

Assemblymember Monique Limon, a Democrat who represents Ventura, authored a bill in February that aims to resolve the question and authorize the Port District to permit and lease plots for aquaculture. The bill is being reviewed by the Assembly Local Government Committee and was paused by the onset of the coronavirus pandemic.

"The challenge has been the myriad of permit requirements and the high level—rightly so—of environmental review the permits should go through," Pendleton said. "It shows how unlikely it would be of any private company going through this on their own."

Contact Marissa Nall at mnall@pacbiztimes.com