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Current Issues in Coastal Ocean and Estuarine Science

NOAA Opens Chesapeake Bay Office in Virginia at VIMS

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) recently selected VIMS as the site for a Chesapeake Bay Office in Virginia. Virginia Coordinator Ms. Paula Jasinski arrived at VIMS in August to open the new workplace.

The NOAA Chesapeake Bay Office (NCBO) was established in 1992 to manage NOAA's activities in Chesapeake Bay and to coordinate with the Chesapeake Bay Program (CBP). The NCBO's main office is co-located with the Chesapeake Bay Program in Annapolis, Maryland.

According to NCBO Director Dr. Lowell Bahner, the idea to establish a lower Bay office first appeared in the NCBO's 2002 Biennial Report. "We'd been getting feedback that we needed a greater presence in Virginia to open up communication pathways and provide a better return on the state's investment," says Bahner.

The idea was supported by Virginia legislators on Capitol Hill, who shared the vision of increased coordination between the NCBO and Virginia programs and agencies. Following congressional authorization

in 2003 and several site-selection visits to Virginia, NCBO staff selected VIMS in spring 2004.

"We realized that a physical presence in Virginia would greatly benefit our office," says Jasinski. "VIMS was an obvious choice—it's a very productive marine research center, presents a good base for us to access current research and product-driven science, and already has several NOAA resources, including CBNERRVA [the Chesapeake Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve], Sea Grant, and CMER [Cooperative Marine Education and Research]."

Jasinski also notes that VIMS is one of NCBO's largest grant recipients. In 2004, VIMS researchers received about one-third of the



Dave Jasinski (Chesapeake Bay Program, L) joins NCBO staff members Paula Jasinski (C) and Walter Priest (R) in front of their new offices in VIMS' Center for Coastal Resources Management.

VIMS Team Discovers Probable Cause of Croaker Deaths

A team of VIMS researchers led by fish pathologist Dr. Wolfgang Vogelbein was kept busy this summer investigating the cause of death for countless Atlantic croaker (*Micropogonias undulatus*) along the coastlines of New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, and Florida. Several million adult croaker died and washed ashore along the U.S. East Coast during July and August.

Although available evidence suggests a bacterial infection of the gills was responsible for the deaths, the exact cause remains unknown, and may perhaps never be known, notes Vogelbein. Research into the cause of the mortality ended in September when the outbreak ceased and newly dead fish were no longer available for study.

"I've never seen anything like this in my 15 years at VIMS," Vogelbein says. "It may have been a one-time occurrence brought on by an unusual combination of storms and wet weather."

Vogelbein notes that infectious diseases in fishes are almost always modulated by environmental factors.

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NCBO's \$15 million grant funding.

VIMS researchers use NCBO funds for a wide variety of research, monitoring, and restoration projects in Chesapeake Bay. These include efforts

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to breed and plant disease-resistant strains of the native oyster *Crassostrea virginica*, and to monitor industry trials of the non-native oyster *C. ariakensis*.

“These efforts are important to overall Bay oyster-restoration activities,” notes Jasinski. “Our new presence here will help us develop stronger partnerships and work more strategically with key players in Maryland and Virginia.”

NCBO funding also supports ChesMMAP (the Chesapeake Bay Multispecies Monitoring and Assessment Program) and FEMAP (the Fishery Ecosystem Monitoring and Assessment Program), two VIMS programs aimed at providing resource managers with data and tools to assess and manage Chesapeake Bay’s fisheries in a sustainable, ecosystem-based manner.

VIMS researchers also rely on NCBO funding to help study and restore Bay grasses, advise shoreline management agencies, develop the next generation of coastal observing systems, and study invasive species.

Jasinski notes that NOAA-funded projects often generate time-sensitive data and deliverables that federal and state managers need for decision-making. “Being on-the-ground in

Virginia will allow us much greater collaboration and oversight on lower Bay projects,” says Jasinski. “We’ll be able to be much more responsive, both to grant recipients and to managers that need the data and tools.”

“Instead of just a funding source, we’d like people to see us as a partner,” adds Bahner. “We’d like to establish a cooperative research program so that NOAA and VIMS staff could work more closely together on research projects.”

As an example of increased collaboration, Bahner cites a plan to deploy the NCBO vessel R/V *Bay Commitment* in parallel with VIMS’ ChesMMAP vessel the R/V *Bay Eagle*. That would help tie the ChesMMAP fisheries data into the bathymetric and habitat data provided by the *Bay Commitment*’s high-tech sonar systems.

The Virginia Office currently comprises three staff members. Jasinski will serve as a liaison between VIMS, other Virginia agencies, and NOAA. Habitat Restoration Specialist Walter Priest, who is funded through the NOAA Restoration Center, will act as statewide liaison to NOAA’s community-based restoration program and develop expertise in lower Bay restoration activities to complement staff in Annapolis. A Geographic Information System (GIS) Analyst will develop GIS and web-based management tools.

The final staffing level for the office is open. “Our goal is simply to get effective people to help in Virginia,” says Bahner. He is currently working to encourage other NOAA offices to take advantage of the Virginia office by relocating or funding additional staff.

Ms. Jasinski’s move to VIMS marks a return to her alma mater, where she earned a M.A. degree in 1992 with advisor Dr. Carl Hershner, studying the effect of sea-level rise on tidal wetlands in Gloucester County. “It’s good to be back in Virginia and continue to work on Bay restoration,” she says.

The move is also one that benefits the Chesapeake Bay Program (CBP). Ms. Jasinski’s husband, Dave Jasinski, is an analyst for CBP and the University of Maryland. A recognized expert on Chesapeake Bay water-quality status and trends, Mr. Jasinski is also now located at VIMS. The relocation allows him to also work more closely with several VIMS scientists and engage them on water-quality issues.

NOAA’s new Chesapeake Bay Office at VIMS, with a focus on research, complements NOAA’s long-term relationship with Nauticus in Norfolk. The Nauticus office, headed by Jim Dixon and Michelle Fox, will continue to serve as NOAA’s education and outreach center for the lower Bay.