

# Getting Started with the Water Harvest Program

**A Guide for Watermen to Make More for Their Catch by Selling Direct at Farmers' Markets**



**Manual by Jimmy & Paige Hogge (Buster's Seafood, Urbanna, VA)**



## Dear Fellow Watermen and Aquaculturist,

More than six years ago, my husband Jimmy started asking me, "Why can't we sell seafood direct?"

Jimmy was selling wholesale at the time, and he was making a small fraction of what the consumer paid for his product. We started taking our catch to farmers' markets, and today, we can make \$5 per pound on fish we might have sold wholesale for 25 or 50 cents per pound. We want to invite you to do the same.

Jimmy and I began the Water Harvest Program and wrote this manual because we want to help you get started so that you can have the same benefits that we've had.

The Water Harvest Program is made up of several groups that you can contact to support you on various points of your journey. Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (VDACS) is the main sponsor of the Water Harvest Program. Along with the Marine Products Board, VDACS offers a wealth of information and tools to help you market your product. The foundation for the project was laid with the help of Virginia Institute of Marine Sciences Advisory Services Department and Virginia Sea Grant.

This manual will help you to take advantage of our experience in selling at farmers' markets, which included a lot of trial and error. In this manual, we've included tips on how to pick a market and where to find more information about regulations. We've also included tips about how to be successful at a farmers' market through quality and pricing, as well as building a customer base.

Jimmy and I have been successful at selling seafood at farmers' markets, and we believe you can be too. Use this manual as a starting point, and contact VDACS for more information about how you can sell your seafood direct with the help of the Water Harvest Program.

Sincerely,

Paige and Jimmy Hogge





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How do I get started selling at Farmers' Markets?

Before you can start selling your product direct to consumers you have to pick a market, choose the product you are going to sell, and make preparations to follow regulations.

Picking a Farmers' Market

With the buy fresh, buy local movement that has come about, more and more farmers' markets want to offer fresh seafood. Finding the right market for your product is critical to your success. Your research and planning are the most important part of the pre-operation process.

Find markets by going on the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services website. <http://www.vdacs.virginia.gov/vagrown/>

When you contact the market manager, here are some of the questions you might want to ask:

- ☒ What time can you set up?
- ☒ Will my truck be accessible to the market?
- ☒ Is there specific parking for vendors?
- ☒ During what seasons is market open?
- ☒ What commitment does this market require, especially insurance, booth rental, and attendance requirements?

Following Requirements for Processing

All seafood processing, from dressing fish to shucking oysters, will require Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point (HACCP) training and a processing facility.

HACCP Training

Virginia Tech Virginia Seafood Agricultural Research and Extension Center in Hampton, VA, offers an inexpensive HACCP training course. Contact the Center for more information: phone 757-727-4861.

Facilities

Sometimes there are facilities in your area that are turn-key ready, while others may take upgrading or some conversion to meet the requirements

Extra Tip: Opportunities

There are other ways you can sell direct to consumers. Consider restaurants, bed-and-breakfasts, fundraisers, local grocery stores, wholesale suppliers, festivals and online sales.

Extra Tip: Insurance

Most farmers markets require insurance. Your market will request a certificate of liability and that the market be named as insured under your policy. Talk with your market manager for more information.



outlined for processing.

Some of the key things you need to look for are:

- ☒ Approved water supply (approved water test)
- ☒ Adequate refrigeration
- ☒ Capability to make ice
- ☒ Approved flow through the facility for the products you want to process.

Previous seafood processing operations should be a good source for a ready start-up, and they may require minimum upgrades to be process ready. If you are doing minimal processing previous restaurants could be another source. Look around your community; perhaps it is just waiting for you.

### Knowing Product-Specific Regulations

The product you offer depends on what you catch, but it also depends on the regulations you can meet. Different types of seafood are regulated by different organizations.

#### Fish, Steamed and Soft-Shell Crab

The FDA Fish and Fisheries Products Hazards and Controls Guidance covers processing for these products. <http://www.fda.gov/Food/Guidance-ComplianceRegulatoryInformation/GuidanceDocuments/Seafood/Fish-and-Fisheries-Products-Hazards-and-Controls-Guide/default.htm>

Processing facilities are inspected by Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (VDACS inspection: 757-363-3909)

#### Picked Crab, Oysters, Clams, Scallops, and Whelk

Department of Health, Division of Shellfish Sanitation regulates these products as well as inspects processing facilities. (Shellfish Sanitation: 804-846-7480)

The Certification of Shellfish and Crab Meat Processing Facilities Manual includes guidance. <http://www.vdh.virginia.gov/EnvironmentalHealth/Shellfish/certification/index.htm>

You should also contact a local Shellfish Sanitation office to learn more about facility inspections. <http://www.vdh.virginia.gov/EnvironmentalHealth/Shellfish/citiesandtowns/index.htm>

#### Extra Tip: Facilities

Any facilities used to process seafood can be inspected by U.S. Food and Drug Administration at any time.



### How can I be successful at Market?

Success at market comes from offering a high-quality product, appropriately pricing your product, and building a repeat customer base.

#### Maintaining Quality at the Market

At market, quality is as much about keeping the product fresh as it is about keeping your space looking neat.

##### Items You'll Need to Maintain Quality

- ☒ Truck, SUV, van, or other large vehicle
- ☒ Several large coolers
- ☒ Thermometers for coolers
- ☒ For Trade Scale (to sell by the pound)
- ☒ One or two large folding tables
- ☒ Fold-up canopy or tent for shade
- ☒ Neatly lettered signs with your business name
- ☒ Markers and small signs to label the price of each product



### Extra Tip: Freshness

We use a thermometer with a simple display that stays on the outside of the cooler so we can monitor temperatures while keeping the coolers shut.

### Keeping Product Fresh

Everything you plan to bring to market should be kept cold (40° or less). Product should be transported in and sold out of coolers, and you'll need to monitor the temperatures inside those coolers throughout the day, especially if you are opening and closing them. When your product is on display, it needs to be heavily iced and kept in the shade.

### Creating a Market Display

Your market set up can be as complicated or simple as you want, but here are a couple of things I'd recommend to draw attention of customers:

- ☒ Have a bright sign that includes your business name and the city and state where you're located;
- ☒ Arrange your display so it is bright and colorful, maybe using a lively cloth or plants and flowers to catch the eye of a passing shopper;
- ☒ Only sell clean product in food approved containers;
- ☒ Only sell high-quality products, remove any that are damaged; and

### Extra Tip: Pricing

Remember, when it comes to pricing, you can always go down, but it's hard to go up!

### Pricing Your Product for Profit

Customers come to the market for high quality and economy. Quality is most often cited as the reason for shopping at the farmers' market. Since you don't have to pay a middleman, selling below retail can still generate profits. However, the high quality of and demand for your product can justify pricing at or even above retail levels.

Here are some things to consider before setting your price:

- ☒ What does a similar product cost at the grocery store?
- ☒ What do other watermen and aquaculturists charge for their products at farmers' markets?
- ☒ Are you going to accept credit cards (there may be additional fees with that)?
- ☒ Are you going to include sales tax in the advertised price or calculate it for each individual sale? (For more information about sales tax, contact the Virginia Department of Taxation [www.tax.virginia.gov](http://www.tax.virginia.gov) or 804-367-8031

### Extra Tip: Pricing

Don't routinely discount your left over product at the end of the day! It is best to have an outside arrangement for discounting and moving leftover product.



### Building a Customer Base

It is so important to build a customer base at farmers' markets. It is through repeat business that you will be successful. Consistency is important. You need to come to market regularly and be in the same location time and time again to give customers confidence in you and your product. You also need to provide a steady stream of product to your customers.

Here are some things you can provide to build yourself a customer base:

- ☒ Recipes and cooking tips
- ☒ Free samples
- ☒ Guidelines for the customers' safe handling of seafood
- ☒ Storage suggestions
- ☒ Bags and ice for customers to carry their seafood home
- ☒ Stories about your work and business.

Remember, customers buy from you because they want to support local business. Sharing your history as a waterman or aquaculturalist will help to build your customers' confidence and trust in you and your product.



## What other helpful tools are available to me?



Add credibility to your products by using the Virginia Grown Water Harvest Logo to help market your product. You can get a copy of the logo shown here by contacting Leanne Dubois. [leanne.dubois@vdacs.virginia.gov](mailto:leanne.dubois@vdacs.virginia.gov) or 804-225-3663

SEASONAL AVAILABILITY				
	JAN.	FEB.	MAR.	APR.
Mackerel, Atlantic				
Black Sea Bass				
Blue Crab				
Bluefish				
Carfish				
Clams				
Crab				

Recipes, season availability charts (such as the sample to the left), and other useful marketing materials are available through the Virginia Marine Products Board. Contact Mike Hutt. [mhutt@vaseafood.org](mailto:mhutt@vaseafood.org) or 757-874-3474.

Seals and tags for packaging seafood are regulated by the Department of Health, and there are strict guidelines that must be followed. Here are several companies you might want to contact when you get to the point of packaging your product:

- L.M. Robinson (P.O. Box 29065, Richmond, VA 23242), phone 804-740-8774 (oyster tyvek tags and printing)
- Sharon Mann (Lottsburg, VA), phone 804-529-6794 (oyster and crabmeat seals)
- William R. Hill (Richmond, VA), phone 804-226-4464 (glass oyster jars & preprinted lids)
- Pride of Virginia Bait & Oyster Company (White Stone, VA), phone 804-435-6740 (full line of boxes, jars, baskets, and crab seasonings)
- Victory Packaging (Baltimore, MD and Chesapeake, VA), phone 800-790-8457 (full line of packaging materials)

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