



Bruce Alford working with Woodshield posts on a longline system.

## A case of 'A Duty of Care' to the environment

Without the maintenance of good water quality in oyster growing and harvest areas the Australian industry – with a marketplace return of over \$300m/yr – would cease to exist.

There are many examples to prove this. It is no surprise then that, in most areas where it operates, the industry is at the forefront of ensuring the protection of the marine and estuarine environments.

In many states, government regulators now view the oyster industry as an indicator of the status of the local marine and estuarine habitats; a healthy environment equates to good water quality which in turn grows healthy oysters.

Australian oyster farmers are now more than ever carrying this environmental awareness into the day-to-day modernisation and improvement of existing farm infrastructure. They now lead the way internationally in the use of environmentally-sustainable farming practices.

There is no better example of this than at the Hawkesbury River in New South Wales. An outbreak of QX disease in 2004 saw the complete collapse of commercial Sydney rock oyster production in the River by mid 2005. Prior to 2004 the Hawkesbury River had been the third-largest oyster growing area in NSW, based solely on traditional stick and tray cultivation techniques going back well over a 100 years. Surviving farmers recognized that there was no future in their traditional approach – relying on the QX-susceptible wild Sydney catch – and set about reinventing their farming methodology to suit the Hawkesbury's growing conditions.

They also recognized need for the progressive elimination of the old tarred-timber infrastructure to protect against attack by marine borers. Fortunately, local grower Rob Moxham had been involved with field trials of a number of affordable

and environmentally-sustainable alternatives for NSW Fisheries' *Tar & Timber Replacement Committee* in the late 1990's. Rob had quickly recognized the advantages offered by a number of these products and had already begun to replace much of his traditional timber infrastructure, including posts, rails and breakwalls with them.

The NSW Government provided \$2.7m in financial assistance to enable Hawkesbury farmers to remove 8000 tonnes of old tar and creosote-treated timber post, rails and 'dead cultivation' and dispose of in EPA approved landfill sites. This farming infrastructure is now progressively being replaced with inert polymer grow-out alternatives. Even the original six and eight foot timber and wire trays have been replaced by similar sized polymer trays. Called the XL Aquatrays, these were designed and manufactured by TTP Plastics (formerly Tooltech).

These trays have also found favor in the shellfish industries elsewhere in the world.

Of equal importance and significance is the large number of treated timber posts and rail that have now been replaced with environmentally-friendly alternatives developed by the plastic recycling company WoodShield Pty Ltd. With manufacturing facilities at Tottenham (Victoria) and Carole Park (Queensland), this company manufactures non-treated, sustainably-harvested pine timber posts and rails encased in sealed recycled plastic. An important feature of the post is the specially designed solid plastic end cap (manufactured by TTP Plastics), which allows the post to be driven into the seabed.

When deciding on a replacing infrastructure, oyster farmers need to give careful consideration to the future disposal costs of timber and other infrastructure treated with tar, creosote or CCA (Copper-Chrome-Arsenate). Because of their method of manufacture and the materials used, WoodShield are able to confidently promote these products as 'no rot or rust' – 'no disposal or chemical issues' – 'no borer or worm penetration' – 'completely sealed' as well as 'certified organic – Australian BFA and NZ BioGro approved'.

The posts have an exceptionally long life expectancy, are easy to handle, easy to remove and relocate if necessary and are recyclable. This is indeed a most sensible use of renewable timber resource coupled with reuse of plastic. The company, apart from being well able to extol the strength and attributes of the posts compared to the unsealed timber alternative, also provide a 10-year guarantee on the posts.

In my travels I have visited several farms where the WoodShield products have been used to replace treated timber and sought comments including any criticism and suggestions for improvements.

Bruce Alford, one of a number of the Hawkesbury's Broken Bay Oyster group in who use the posts, gives a typical response: "I consider the posts are brilliant. By using them I will be spared the

expense of having to replace plain coated timber posts in eight to ten years time; not only the capital cost and labor involved, but also the approximate \$260 per tonne it would have cost me to dispose of the old posts at a specially-lined tip." (Best practice use of posts and rails is estimated to cost anywhere between \$60-75,000 per hectare, including the cost of baskets and trays).

No less laudatory are the comments from many growers in other Australian States, as well as New Zealand. Currently there are trials being conducted on farms in the United States of America where it is anticipated that these long-life, environmentally-friendly products will be welcomed.

Woodshield's Sales and Marketing Manager, Ashley Davidson, says he is particularly pleased at being able to recycle used plastics and put them to a useful purpose instead of filling refuse tips.

The Hawkesbury River oyster industry which now grows triploid Pacific oysters and QX resistant oysters developed by NSW DPI is recovering quickly with production now approaching pre QX production levels. These resilient oyster

growers continue to work tirelessly with State and local government, the Catchment Management Authority, the community and other key stakeholders to improve the environmental health of the lower Hawkesbury River system. In recognition of their work the Hawkesbury River oyster industry have in recent years have won a number of major environmental awards.

WoodShield, in association with their post customers, have certainly stepped up to the plate as an other environmental champion exercising a "A Duty of Care" to the world around us.

By **Reg Breakwell.**

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*Reg spent 21 years with TTP Plastics as Export and Marketing Manager, and continues his association with the company in a part-time advisory capacity. Reg recently attended the 2012 Shellfish Futures event in Tasmania – and says he'll always have a keen interest in the continued growth of the Australian oyster industry.*



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