

Paul Galtsoff Industry Award *Leslie Sturmer, University of Florida*



At its 115th annual meeting in Baltimore, the National Shellfisheries Association recognized Leslie Sturmer (statewide Shellfish Aquaculture Extension Specialist at the University of Florida) for her outstanding research and outreach contributions to the U.S. aquaculture industry by awarding her the Paul Galtsoff Industry Award.

Few people in the field of fisheries and aquaculture can lay claim to fundamentally changing a community for the better the way that Leslie has in Cedar Key, Florida. In less than 20 years, a diverse team led by Leslie has saved the small fishing village of Cedar Key from the economic depression caused by the closure of the traditional gill net fishery by working with the community and government to develop the State's clam farming industry. Clam farming is now the most lucrative marine aquaculture industry in Florida, with a statewide economic impact of about \$53 million (USD). Cedar Key produces more than 90% of the total clam crop in Florida, with an annual farm gate value of \$17.8 million. The industry now grows about 175 million clams per year and provides the Cedar Key area with more than 550 jobs. The community has become an advocate for environmental protection of water resources in the region. This transformative shellfish aquaculture success story can be largely attributed

to Leslie's leadership in providing the science, technology transfer, and outreach that supported and continues to support the thriving clam culture industry of Florida.

Leslie has led the development of an applied research program driven by industry needs. She has brought together teams of scientists and external funds (nearly \$5 million) to tackle questions in the fields of shellfish physiology, genetics, breeding, soil science, aquatic health, water quality, product quality, seafood technology, economics, and business management. Hand-in-hand with industry partners, she has driven the industry forward and addressed challenges. This interaction has always been before, during, and after a research project, as a constant 'reality check' on research, and a guarantee that the research results got to those that needed them most. With the relatively recent interest in oyster aquaculture in Florida, Leslie has worked to answer the most pressing questions from the industry both through applied research and outreach efforts. She has not only led many research projects, including providing growers with quantitative data on survival and growth among different growing areas but also, critically testing different lines of oysters to help growers get past the episodic high mortality events observed in several locations. In addition to her research, Leslie has spearheaded several outreach efforts with the oyster industry. These include in-person and virtual workshops responding to 'triploid mortality events', development of a series of outreach handouts to help new oyster farmers prepare for tropical storms, and a very popular online course for new oyster growers.

Leslie has also been astute about the political landscape and proactively engaged politicians and regulators. She was the Vice-President of the Florida Aquaculture Association, developing and supporting major legislation for marine aquaculture. She was key in organizing receptions in Tallahassee, providing tours of the new shellfish aquaculture businesses in Cedar Key for Florida House Agriculture Committee members and staff, and setting up a legislative hearing in Cedar Key. These efforts led to sweeping legislative changes. In 1996, the Florida Aquaculture Policy Act, Chapter 597, F.S., "Aquaculture IS Agriculture", was passed with shellfish aquaculture declared to be in the public interest, a certification program replaced multiple permits, and all aquaculture authority was transferred to the state agriculture agency. She also has served on the Florida Farm Bureau since 2005, working on the aquaculture committee to promote shellfish aquaculture across the state.

Leslie's work with the bivalve shellfish industry began in 1988 at the Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institution. She was engaged as the Project Manager for a federally-funded job retraining program for over 25 underemployed oyster harvesters in Apalachicola, Florida - the equivalent of being thrown into the deep end of the outreach and extension pool. In this program, she worked with the industry to train participants, gain oyster production data, and address permitting issues. The Apalachicola oystermen (and their families) became proficient and enthusiastic shellfish growers, and although the project ended without the appropriate state submerged land leases in place, it was not for lack of effort or expertise.

In her current role, Leslie routinely deals with a diverse industry (over 250 shellfish growers, over 10 seed suppliers, over 50 shellfish wholesalers, and numerous related businesses) in over 14 counties along the Florida coast. She works closely with the Cedar Key Aquaculture Association, the Statewide Clam Aquaculture Task Force, and several professional associations, including serving as an *ex officio* member of the Board of Directors of the East Coast Shellfish Growers Association and serving on the Advisory Committee to Oyster South.

As her colleagues and friends, we are thrilled to have Leslie recognized with this prestigious award for her contributions to the shellfish aquaculture industry and coastal communities.

Bill Walton
John Supan

