



CASE STUDY

FOOD AND FISHERIES ON MARYLAND'S EASTERN SHORE: FILLING GAPS AND MAXIMIZING OPPORTUNITIES USING UNDERUTILIZED ASSETS

JUNE 2025 // PREPARED BY NADO RESEARCH FOUNDATION

Mid-Shore Regional Council (MSRC) was created in 2001 as a cooperative regional planning and development agency to foster physical, economic, and social development. Mid-Shore is a federally designated Economic Development District (EDD) serving Caroline, Dorchester, and Talbot Counties on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. MSRC also has the distinction of being the smallest EDD in the country, operating with staff of two.



MSRC Region

MSRC, in its Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS), identified a focus on natural resource-based industries. A key goal was to “Strengthen and diversify agriculture, forestry, fisheries, and support newest techniques in aquaculture and agriculture.” Objectives included exploring and identifying emerging agricultural and food market opportunities, supporting the development of value-added agriculture businesses, identifying opportunities for high-value aquaculture operations that create new opportunities for watermen and entrepreneurs and more.

One key action MSRC took in pursuit of this goal was to develop Shore Gourmet, a nonprofit strategic initiative whose mission is to bolster the local food economy and support and promote value-added food producers in Maryland’s Mid-Shore region, that has now expanded to Delaware. Recognizing the challenges faced by local food entrepreneurs—such as navigating complex regulations, marketing, and distribution—the MSRC collaborated with partners like the Chesapeake Culinary Center (a program of the Eastern Shore Entrepreneurship Center, another spinoff of MSRC) to create a supportive ecosystem for these businesses.

Shore Gourmet, incorporated as a 501c6 nonprofit in 2006 by MSRC, is a business development initiative of the MSRC, tasked with assisting local food entrepreneurs on Maryland’s Eastern Shore and Delaware in bringing their products to market by providing resources and guidance on aspects like packaging, labeling, and business planning. Shore Gourmet offers distribution and consulting services to the local agricultural community to market value-added and gourmet food products.

In its early stages, Shore Gourmet focused on assisting local value-added food producers with product development and marketing, collaborating with entities like the Chesapeake

Culinary Center and Chesapeake Fields to enhance its outreach and effectiveness. Shore Gourmet secured funding from various sources, including a grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's "Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food" initiative, which enabled the expansion of Shore Gourmet's services and reach into neighboring regions. To further support food-based startups, the Chesapeake Culinary Center received a \$30,000 grant from the Maryland Agricultural Education and Rural Development Assistance Fund (MAERDAF) in 2018. This funding facilitated the hiring of staff focused on marketing and operations, enhancing the center's capacity to assist entrepreneurs in product development and market entry.

Through these collaborative efforts, the MSRC and its partners have fostered a robust environment for local food businesses, contributing to the economic vitality of the Mid-Shore region.

Understanding Value Chain Gaps



Roxanne Wolf, Project Manager and Development and Education Coordinator of Shore Gourmet, takes a whole system approach to food systems in her region, focused on feeding people while also creating economic development opportunities. When she started six years ago, she explained, "My sister [who works at Caroline County Public Schools] had a small grant to consider value-added opportunities for farmers. We wanted to think about regional economic development for the agricultural and seafood industry while looking at the food system itself. Where were the holes? How can we feed our community locally sourced food?"

Their first step was to look at the data. "The majority of food we were getting was coming from out of state and sometimes out of the country." The first thing that stood out was that ready-to-eat meals for seniors and meal supplements provided by nonprofit organizations on the Eastern Shore were purchased from Baltimore businesses. A United Way ALICE (Asset Limited Income Constrained Employed) study found that the population of the working poor and poor had been growing since the pandemic. Roxanne's goal was to keep farmers farming, watermen fishing, and provide additional income sources for the working poor.

Through her research, she found a variety of value chain gaps including:

1. **Processing, aggregation, and adequate storage** through freezing, dehydration, and freeze drying. The region did not have enough capacity to meet existing demands.
2. **Domestic offerings in profitable products like specialty mushrooms, herbs, and other nutraceutical crops** were few and far between, necessitating imported products.
3. No farmer group was working together to **brand a niche crop** for the state, as she saw in other states, like Wisconsin cheese and Vermont maple.

Fighting Hunger, Creating Livelihoods and Fueling Local Farms

Roxanne's efforts began with a backpack program for seniors, which in 2019 cost \$2.48 per day. By 2025, that cost had risen to over \$3.10 per day.

While reviewing the senior meal program, Roxanne questioned, "Why are we feeding seniors these meals but not children?" This led her to collaborate with her sister Beth Brewster and Caroline County Public Schools (CCPS) to assess the cost, impact on student behavior and grades, and feasibility of providing sealed, ready-to-eat meals for students.

In December 2019, she launched a pilot program, replacing canned meals with frozen, nutritionally balanced ready meals for 10 children. These meals were assembled by cafeteria workers using locally sourced produce. "We were handing \$100 to a farmer who was about to throw away broccoli. To a small farmer, that meant a lot," Roxanne recalled.

Her sister, Beth Brewster, who oversees CCPS cafeterias, played a key role in scaling up the program. During the pandemic in February 2021, when children and seniors were stuck indoors, Beth and her cafeteria staff prepared and sealed meals for 2,000 individuals, delivering them door-to-door. This initiative not only ensured access to nutritious food for the underserved but also kept 42 cafeteria workers employed through the pandemic, while maximizing the use of local ingredients from local growers.

Since then, the program has expanded to provide USDA-approved non-congregate meals for children across three counties, delivering 100,000 meals in a tri-county area.

Expanding Healthy Food Access One Stop at a Time

Roxanne proudly shares, "My sister is pretty amazing... she wanted a shuttle, and the Maryland Transit Authority had a retired one they were willing to donate. Voila! The Shore Gourmet Mobile Market was born."



Designed to serve food deserts—areas without access to grocery stores—the Shore Gourmet "Sho Go" Mobile Market delivers milk, eggs, soups, frozen meals, ready-to-eat meals, fresh local produce, and pantry staples directly to neighborhoods in need, where seniors, families, and young children may have limited access to farmers markets due to rural transportation

issues. Demand has been so high that two more shuttles are currently being converted to expand the program.

The service has been especially popular among seniors, who appreciate the affordability and convenience of the meals, which cost just \$5–\$6 and often provide enough for two servings. The program's ultimate goal is to make healthy, locally sourced food accessible to those who need it most. In the summer of 2024, the mobile unit also began distributing USDA-approved non-congregate meals to children in these neighborhoods, further expanding its impact.

Building Opportunities from Blue Catfish

Underutilized resources are a key element in the wealth creation approach to economic development. All communities have underutilized resources; they are resources currently available in a region that, for one reason or another, are not yet mobilized to full benefit. In 2019, the American blue economy grew faster than the nation's economy as a whole, supporting 2.4 million jobs and contributing \$397 billion to the nation's gross domestic product through activities such as tourism and recreation, shipping and transportation, commercial and recreational fishing, power generation, research, and related goods and services. (<https://www.noaa.gov/blue-economy>).

During the pandemic, the Maryland Department of Natural Resources (DNR) invited Roxanne to join the DNR Cares Committee to address funding for and build resilience in the seafood industry, which had been severely impacted. Roxanne engaged with watermen to explore the potential of harvesting blue catfish—an invasive species decimating traditional Chesapeake seafood. Blue catfish can grow to be five feet long and weigh more than 100 pounds. In some tributaries, blue catfish currently make up 70% of the biomass. Due to their abundance and their diet of a variety of other fish

Blue Catfish as an example of Nascent Demand

"Nascent demand" refers to a demand that is in its early stages of development, emerging, or just beginning to grow. Nascent demand can present opportunities for businesses that are able to anticipate and capitalize on emerging needs. Companies that can identify and cater to nascent demand early on can gain a significant competitive advantage.

Sectors with nascent market opportunities may require less time and investment to enable them to meet the demands of a range of demand partners, and they may become profitable at scale more quickly than value chains where there is no current value-added processing and no established relationships between transactional partners.

Blue catfish illustrates not only an underutilized resource but also an example of nascent demand.



species, blue catfish are having negative impacts on the local ecosystem and are threatening the livelihoods of local watermen.

Roxanne Wolf, Development and Education Coordinator for Shore Gourmet, commented, “It’s almost like everything leads back to feeding people. Our initial involvement began four years ago when we decided to provide catfish cakes in the schools.

More recently, a local food bank was looking for new protein choices for its recipients, and our two worlds collided. We found out that local watermen weren’t making a lot harvesting blue catfish and we needed more protein in our food pantries for our families. So, our efforts started around being able to harvest blue catfish for the food bank.”

Local watermen were not harvesting the blue catfish because the market price was too low to make it worthwhile for them, partly due to the lack of local certified processors. When asked what price would incentivize them, they stated that 60 cents per pound would make it profitable.

Roxanne’s sister Beth took the lead in addressing a key regulatory hurdle. Under the 2005 Farm Bill, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) mandated inspections for catfish, the only fin fish with this requirement. As a result, with 17 seafood processors in the state, only four of which are USDA-certified, Tilghman Island Seafood in Talbot County became the only USDA-certified blue catfish processing facility on Maryland’s Eastern Shore.

Today, the processing business is generating millions of dollars, and watermen are consistently earning at least 60 cents per pound for their catch. It is now more lucrative for a waterman to sell blue catfish, which can also be purchased at Giant or Whole Foods as an affordable protein option for families. Beth Brewster, Supervisor of Food Services at Caroline County Public Schools, is getting a USDA recipe for blue catfish fish cakes (“The Poor Man’s Crabcake” or the “cattie”) approved through a processor from Pennsylvania to be used for the school system and government agencies, both domestically and internationally. Part of the long-term plan is to secure its inclusion on the formulary for military bases and other government entities.

Tilghman cannot process or store blue catfish fast enough, which has created another value chain gap to fill.

For Roxanne, success in the blue catfish initiative was about strategic networking. “It was about bringing people together and asking the right questions: What do you have? What do you need?” The collaboration brought entrepreneurial and forward-thinking individuals to the table, along with key stakeholders from Maryland Agriculture, the Department of Natural Resources, and the Coastal Conservation Association of Maryland. The latter was particularly motivated to participate, as blue catfish are on the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s (NOAA’s) list of invasive species threatening the Chesapeake Bay. “We turned a speed bump into an opportunity,” Roxanne noted.

In the meantime, the initiative has identified both existing and new entrepreneurs who can process blue catfish into smoked products and catfish cakes, with other value-added products under consideration. Maryland’s stricter regulations present hurdles; larger blue catfish tend to have higher toxicity levels. Yet, where there are obstacles, there are also solutions. Roxanne discovered that farmers struggle with high fertilizer costs, and by composting large catfish carcasses through an existing composting facility, they can significantly reduce these expenses—creating yet another win-win solution.

Maryland Agriculture is collaborating with Maryland Commerce to work on agriculture as an economic development strategy. The latest idea from Maryland Agriculture about how to serve the increasing demand for value-added processing is to aggregate processors, creating a hub and spoke model, encouraging and incentivizing more blue catfish processors. In addition, there is interest in a pilot program to allow for a stunning process (Ikejime which is a traditional Japanese method of killing fish quickly and humanely) on fishing boats to preserve the quality of the fish to tap markets that haven’t yet been tapped, namely the market for sushi grade fish.

Beyond production, there are strategies around consumption as well. Connections with the Food Network, rebranding the fish as wild-caught Maryland blue catfish, and marketing a trail highlighting blue catfish have created additional demand and supported increased consumption.



[Click here for a StoryMap about blue catfish.](#)

Repurposing Poultry Houses

Roxanne discovered that farmers in Maryland were losing their contracts with poultry aggregators, leaving more than 1,000 poultry houses vacant. Without a protocol for bacterial abatement or alternative uses, these underutilized structures posed both an economic and environmental challenge. The abandoned poultry houses, once profitable assets, were now leaching bacteria into the water tables, further complicating the issue.

In response, Shore Gourmet took on the task of repurposing a poultry house, believing the bacteria could be effectively managed. Roxanne found that the University of Delaware had developed a bacterial abatement protocol, which was successfully implemented at a farm in Ridgely, Maryland. The farmer then piloted controlled environment agriculture (CEA) within the decontaminated poultry house, utilizing aquaponics, aeroponics, hydroponics, and growing chambers to cultivate a variety of crops.

However, competing with large-scale aquaculture operations proved difficult. Instead, they identified a niche market in nutraceutical products, focusing on high-value crops such as spirulina, baby ginger, specialty herbs, and mushrooms. Shore Gourmet adopted a systems-based approach to agriculture and aquaculture—Maryland's largest economic sectors—by leveraging value-added products and produce, addressing economic development barriers, and providing strategic solutions.

The poultry house project was funded by [TEDCO \(Maryland Technology Development Corporation\)](#), an independent entity of the State of Maryland that supports business creation and growth through funding for early-stage, technology-driven enterprises.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. **Turn gaps into opportunities.** Roxanne and Shore Gourmet have shown how to transform challenges—like invasive blue catfish or vacant poultry houses—into assets. These underutilized resources became the foundation for new value creation and economic opportunity. This mindset of identifying and filling gaps is central to wealth creation, and it opens doors for entrepreneurs to thrive.
2. **Research, Partner, and Pilot.** Shore Gourmet's process starts with thorough research to understand a need or issue. The next step is finding partners with a shared interest, then testing the hypothesis through small-scale pilots. Using value propositions to engage stakeholders—by clearly showing what's in it for them—is essential to a successful wealth-building approach. Scaling only comes after proving what works.
3. **Start Small, Grow Steady.** Not every idea works the first time, and that's to be expected. Roxanne's approach is to begin small, learn, and grow over time. What began with meals for just 10 children expanded to over 100,000 summer meals in 2024, benefiting both children and local farmers. At its core, this work is about feeding communities and supporting the working poor—including farmers and watermen. The path to impact starts with small steps, strong partnerships, and systems that grow with your capacity.
4. **Food Systems Work Drives Local Economic Growth.** Investments in food systems don't just address hunger — they generate real economic development impacts. These programs attract new dollars into communities by creating jobs, supporting local farmers and food producers, expanding markets for regional goods, and keeping food dollars circulating locally. Whether through mobile markets, farm-to-school initiatives, or food hubs, these efforts strengthen local economies while meeting essential community needs.

This case study was written by NADO Research Foundation Regional Development Researcher/Wealth Creation Specialist Melissa Levy.



This resource is offered through the Economic Development District Community of Practice (EDD CoP), managed by the NADO Research Foundation to build the capacity of the national network of EDDs. To learn more, visit: www.nado.org/EDDCoP. The EDD CoP is made possible through an award from the U.S. Economic Development Administration, U.S. Department of Commerce (ED22HDQ3070106). The statements, findings, conclusions, and recommendations in this resource are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Economic Development Administration or the U.S. Department of Commerce.