Whitman nixes $150,000 for oyster planting

By JEAN JONES
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Gov. Christie Whitman’s “pocket veto” of a bill which would have provided a $150,000 jump start for the oyster industry’s Oyster Redevelopment Account probably means that there will be no shell planting this year.

A pocket veto is when a bill dies because the Governor fails to sign it.

The bill, introduced by Assemblyman Nick Asselta, would have provided a one-time lump sum to the Oyster Redevelopment Account. The money would have been used to plant shells on the bottom of Delaware Bay, which provides a clean surface for larval oysters to attach for continued growth, and for an intermediate transplant of oysters from seed beds in the upper bay, where they grow slowly, downbay to other beds where they could be harvested by oystermen.

The account would be replenished each year through fees from the oyster industry, which would be matched by the state.

The governor reportedly said the funding should be considered through the budget process, but it is too late for that to happen this year.

“I don’t believe it could be done in time for summer planting,” said Jim Joseph, chief of the Bureau of Shellfisheries.

“The fiscal year is up in July. If included in the budget, the money wouldn’t be usable until late next June. Right now, there’s not a lot of money in the account. It’s only about $97,000. The last two years, we spent $125,000 on shells,” he said.

Shells are bought from C.J. Langenfelder, a Maryland firm which gets the shells from the Chesapeake Bay, where there is a very thick layer on the bottom.

There is no such covering on the Delaware Bay bottom, so no place from which they could be transplanted to provide better conditions for catching a good “set” of larval oysters. It has been shown in the past that areas where new shells are planted have a much heavier set.

Joseph said he did not know if it would be feasible to try to plant a smaller number of shells than the 185,000 bushels which recently have been planted each year.

“I don’t know what minimum amount Langenfelder would come up here for,” he said.

Joseph said he will get together a meeting of the Oyster Management Committee to discuss what should be done.