Oyster industry fights back

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COMMERCIAL TWP. — The Delaware Bay oyster industry has taken some hard hits in recent years, but oystermen continue to look for ways to make a living in an industry beset with problems.

There have been few good years since a parasite called MSX appeared in force in the bay in 1967 and killed about 97 percent of oysters within a year.

Rutgers University has since developed an MSX-resistant strain of oyster which could be used in aquaculture and native oysters developed a certain resistance on their own, but MSX was followed by Dermo, another parasite, which in the past decade has proved just as disastrous.

While both parasites weaken and eventually kill oysters, they are harmless to humans.

The parasites have changed forever the way oysters are farmed here.

Previously, oystermen were allowed to transplant oysters from the state-owned seed beds in the upper bay to their leased grounds in the lower bay each spring.

Called Bay Season, the transplant allowed the slow-growing oysters to be moved to an area where they grew more quickly and after a couple of years would reach a size where they could be profitably harvested.

Marketing oysters directly from the seed beds was forbidden. Harvesting from the leased grounds took place in the fall.

With MSX and Dermo present, however, oysters left on the leased grounds would be mostly dead by the following spring.

Both parasites are more prevalent in waters of higher salinity, in the lower bay. Predators, primarily oyster drills, are also more numerous in saltier water.

The situation became so bad that in the early 1990s for several years there was no Bay Season, and virtually no oysters.

Bivalve Packing, the only shucking house to survive the decimation of bay oysters, kept its workers employed by bringing in oysters from Connecticut to be shucked there.

Working together, oystermen and the state have managed to preserve a valuable resource and keep the industry going, though only as a shadow of what formerly existed.

Oystermen today are allowed a spring harvest, as well as a fall harvest, and direct marketing is allowed from the seed beds.

An intermediate transplant brings oysters down from the upper beds to the lower seed beds, where they grow a little faster, for oystermen to harvest the following season.

Another thing which has changed radically is shell planting.

Oysters grow best on a clean, hard surface, such as another oyster shell. If larval oysters don't find a suitable surface to which they can attach, they die.

When the industry was thriving, oystermen were required to keep 30 percent of their stocked shells for replanting. When this source dried up, the state began buying shells from the Chesapeake Bay, where there is a deep layer on the bottom.

This may be the last year shells are available from that source, as a ban is being contemplated which would forbid the removal of the Chesapeake shells.

Money to purchase the shells also has been a problem.

Although oystermen asked that a tax be imposed upon them based on the number of bushels of oysters harvested, to be paid into a "clutch" fund for replanting, there aren't that many bushels being harvested. The number goes down each year.

"As the crowning blow, the governor this year "pocket vetoed" an appropriation of $150,000 for revitalization of the seed beds. The money would have paid for shell planting this year, but the governor never signed the bill, thus the term 'pocket veto.'"

Oystermen once more are looking for sources of funds and trying to work out more new ways to manage the resource so that oystermen will continue to grow in Delaware Bay until solutions can be found to the MSX/Dermo problem.

Researchers also are working on finding a way to combat this dual scourge. Aquaculture now is being promoted as an alternate way of oyster farming. Disease resistant oysters are put out in fresh bags or contained in other ways in parts of the bay where they are accessible.