Oystermen lose spring season

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There probably will be no spring oyster harvest in Delaware Bay this year and the fall harvest may be canceled as well, depending on a number of factors influencing the condition of the resource.

The Delaware Bay Shellfish Council voted recently to cancel the spring season.

The council is an advisory body and the last word will come from Department of Environmental Protection Commissioner Robert Shinn.

"Ultimately, the commissioner has the final word. I will talk to our people in Trenton on Monday," said Jim Joseph, chief of the Bureau of Shellfisheries, who conducts council meetings and serves as liaison between the state and the local council.

Dr. John Kraeuter, of the Haskin Shellfish Research Laboratory, at Bivalve, gave an assessment of the condition of the resource at the February meeting.

There was no good news.

Oyster mortality is up. Two parasites, MSX and Dermo, continue to take high toll of oysters and there has been insufficient recruitment (successful reproduction) to make up the losses.

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Kraeuter had recommended that all the money in the cultch fund, which is fed by a tax paid by oystermen on each bushel of oysters harvested, be used to buy shells to improve the condition of the bay bottom.

Legislation which will ban the selling of shells outside the Chesapeake will shut this source of shell in the future.

Clean shell, or cultch, is planted to catch a growth of larval oysters, which attach to shell or another clean, hard surface while they form their own shell and continue to grow.

The Delaware Bay lacks the Chesapeake's deep layers of shell which can be mined and the dwindling resource has not produced enough shocked shell to replace what is taken from the bay each year.

Kraeuter also had said that the only way there could be a spring harvest was if everything that was removed was replaced by oysters moved down from the upper beds.

Four of the five council members were present at last Tuesday's meeting.

Councilwoman Nancy Sittoni, who was absent, but at various points in the meeting, Bailey, Steve Fleetwood, Bill Bradway and chairman Richard J. Malinowski made motions or suggestions for various actions to be taken. No motion was seconded.

The motion which finally gained approval was presented by Bailey.

It called for $37,500 of approximately $100,000 in the cultch fund be spent to purchase 50,000 bushels of shells from the Chesapeake and $63,500 be spent to pay oystermen to move oysters down from the upper state-owned beds, with the bay to be closed this spring.

Earlier, it was proposed that 20,000 bushels be moved by oystermen, without compensation. Each oysterman then could harvest the number of bushels he had moved.

This was rejected by oystermen, who said they could not even break even with such an arrangement.

Forty had signed up to participate in the transplant, but some did not realize they would not be paid.

The division of 20,000 bushels between 40 boats, if all participated, also would allow for a harvest of only 500 bushels per boat.

"Five hundred bushels wouldn't hardly pay the railway bill," said oysterman Charlie Clark.

Joseph said if you look at the numbers, there should be no harvest.

The transplant from the upper beds would allow them to decline at the rate of 10 percent a year, a situation that would not be allowed in any other fishery.

Unless summer mortality falls below 30 percent, there would be no fall harvest without another transplant, he said.

Fleetwood moved to take $15,000 of the cultch fund and let the suction dredge boat Islander move 30,000 bushels and buy shell with the rest of the money.

Oysterman Barney Hollinger said there were times in the past when no shells were planted and the oysters came back anyway.

"If we don't plant shells, they will come back again," he said.

Malinowski asked how many oystermen were for shutting down the bay this spring.

Several hands went up, but Wayne Robinson insisted a harvest was needed to help Delaware Bay oystermen keep their place in the market and save their investment in boats and equipment.

Bailey moved to have a spring season, use $25,000 to move oysters down the bay and use the shell tax money from the spring harvest to move more oysters later.

Bradway then moved to spend all the money for moving oysters downstream.

"You can spend all the money as far as I'm concerned. I've seen the bay closed for two years, then opened for two weeks, and the next year opened for two weeks, then closed again," he said.

Royce Reed, from the Shellfisheries Office, said he has seen beds with only 10 percent oysters left on them.

"We used to close the beds at 40 percent. We're maintaining this fishery at the lowest possible level. We took the cream off and we're leaving the dregs," Reed said.

Then came Bailey's accepted motion.