Official approves harvesting bay oysters

By MILES JACKSON
Staff Writer

The Delaware Bay oyster harvest is on.

At least as far as Robert Shinn, commissioner of the state Department of Environmental Protection, is concerned.

Shinn's decision recently, and the notification of fishermen early last week, means the harvest that pumps $3 million to $4 million into the economy of the Port Norris area moves forward.

At least one operator of five oyster boats won't be part of it.

Shinn's decision goes against the recommendations of the New Jersey Shell Fisheries Council, which is made up of oystermen.

"The commissioner based his decision in large part on a study by state and federal shellfish experts who said the limited harvest will not hurt the long-term health of the Delaware Bay's 17,000 acres of shellfish beds, according to Jim Joseph, chief of the DEP's Bureau of Shellfisheries.

"The council had urged the commissioner to ban the harvest for at least the three-month spring season.

"The commissioner put a lot of thought into this decision and listened to a wide range of opinions," Joseph said Wednesday. "All issues were considered."

A provision in the decision — to spread shells to create new beds — figured in allowing the harvest, according to Joseph.

"Old shells from out-of-state that will be spread on the bay's bottoms will not be available until next year, he said. But the economic effects of banning the harvest also figured in the decision, Joseph said.

"We have said all along that we want to be in the marketplace," Joseph said. "We came up with a scenario that will allow us to do that."

The harvest will be limited to 20,000 bushels per boat.

Boats participating in the harvest will be required to transport younger oysters from beds in the upper bay to beds in the lower bay where they grow larger and have higher-quality meat.

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A vocal group of oystermen said Dermo, a parasite that thrives in the saltier waters of the lower bay, has decimated the beds in the lower bay.

The harvest of oysters in the bay plunged to 116,500 bushels in 1999 from 257,800 in 1998, largely because of Dermo.

"I'm in the business and I like to make money," said Todd Reeves, 36, who runs five boats out of Bivalve.

"But I want to have a future in the business."

The bay's oyster beds were closed for two years in the early 1990s when conditions were less severe than now, according to Reeves.

"The people from DEP say they want to keep us in the market, but that's not their job," he said. "Their job is to manage the resource. And this decision doesn't do that."

Other oystermen disagreed.

"If you can make money, you should be able to go out," Steven Fleetwood, manager of Bivalve packing, said last week.

Making money notwithstanding, Reeves said he will not take part in the harvest.

"We're not going," Reeves said. "It just doesn't seem right. They have the council to advise them on how to manage the oyster beds and then they go against our decision."

Shinn's decision is the first time the state has gone against the council's advice, Reeves said.