Corps delays oyster health monitoring

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A little-publicized facet of the Army Corps of Engineers' plan to deepen the Delaware River has been a program to monitor the health of oysters in Delaware Bay.

The corps agreed to pay for such studies before, during and after the project to ensure dredging does not further harm the oyster industry, wracked by decades of disease problems.

But the corps ended a yearlong initial data collection phase of the study last month, removing nine buoys which were providing monthly water quality samples.

It halted the program because it is uncertain when dredging will begin and a one-year, $400,000 contract with an environmental contractor expired in April.

"We thought it would be financially prudent to get back to (monitoring) when we have an idea when (dredging) will get going," corps spokesman Richard Chlan said. Oyster monitoring will resume two to three months before deepening begins, he said.

Of course, some see the $311 million dredging project as a waste of tax money. Others say the region's economy depends on a deeper river.

Casting the launch date in doubt, Chlan said, is Delaware's review of state environmental permits. The review probably won't be completed until fall.

Ironically, a larger shadow over the project - a General Accounting Office investigation - has not played a role in the corps' scheduling decisions so far.

Surprisingly, the GAO has yet to tell the Army Corps that it plans to investigate the economic justifications and environmental impacts of dredging.

The GAO has yet to say when the investigation will begin. Anyway, it will ultimately be up to Congress to determine whether to stop the project it approved nearly a decade ago, Chlan said.

Politics aside, the oyster monitoring program had been filling a need. New Jersey and Delaware have funded little research like this, said Eric Powell.

The director of Rutgers University's Haskin Shellfish Research Laboratory in Cumberland County, Powell has nothing but praise for the program. He said its data were giving researchers a better picture of how changing ecological conditions in the bay affect oysters.
But he warns the corps is setting itself up for trouble when the deepening project starts. Oyster populations could drop as the result of natural circumstances, but the corps will be missing important data it may need to defend the dredging project, he said.

"The fact is, there is nothing worse than having gaps in a time series," Powell said. "They'll always come back to bite you."