DEP bans shellfish harvest in Del. Bay

It is the second time in a year that the same bacterium in Delaware Bay oysters has sickened consumers.

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State environmental officials indefinitely banned shellfish harvesting in 110 square miles of the Delaware Bay on Monday after oysters that sickened three people in California and Maine were traced back to New Jersey.

The Department of Environmental Protection closed shellfish beds from Egg Island Point in Cumberland County to Moish Maull Shoal Light off Artificial Island in Salem County.

The harvest suspension was prompted by an outbreak of Vibri parahermolyticus, or Vp, a bacterium related to cholera, according to the DEP.

One man became sick in Maine on June 25 after eating a raw oyster on a half shell in a restaurant, said DEP spokeswoman Elaine Makatura. She developed diarrhea and abdominal cramps, followed by nausea and vomiting. She was admitted to a hospital early in the morning and released the same day.

Her husband, the same appetizer, but reported only minor symptoms.

The oysters were subsequently traced to shellfish har-...(Continued from Page A1)

vested in Delaware Bay between June 11 and June 14, Makatura said.

Details on a California woman who also became sick after eating Delaware Bay oysters were not immediately available, she said.

This is the second time in a year that Vp in Delaware Bay oysters has sickened consumers. Last summer, the bay's oysters sickened two Virginia men in separate incidents.

As they did last year, DEP officials blamed the sicknesses on higher than normal air and water temperatures.

"It has nothing to do with human waste or pollution," Makatura said. "It's naturally occurring bacteria found in coastal water."

DEP spokeswoman Mary Helen Cervantes said warm temperatures increased the concentration of Vp, although she could not say exactly how much warmer the bay is this year.

Bay-water samples were collected Monday to see whether Vp remains at unsafe levels, Makatura said. The results should be known in two to three days.

Susan Ford, a research professor at Haskin Shellfish Research Lab in Bivalve, said the closure may cause some short-term economic hardship to shellfish harvesters and packers, but they'll be able to harvest their full quota once the bay is re-opened.

The bigger problem may be the black eye such closures give to New Jersey shellfish, Ford said. Perhaps the industry should consider ending its summer oyster harvests, she said.

"It's something the industry should take seriously," Ford said. "What's more important, our name or the ability to har-vest in the summer?"

Until the 1970s, nobody harvested from the bay in July and August, even on private shellfish beds. That was partly because oysters spawn in summer, decreasing the quality of the meat, and also because there wasn't adequate refrigeration to safely transport warm-weather harvests, she said.

With the advent of refrigeration, the state lifted the summer-harvest ban in the 1970s, she said. "It might be time to rethink it," Ford said.

Walter Czarnie, a longtime Rutgers University researcher at the Haskin Lab, said after last year's outbreak that the problem stems from harvesting oysters in the upper bay, rather than transplanting them to the lower bay before harvest.

Salinities in the lower bay are higher, making it harder for Vp to thrive, he said.

Vp illness is far more common in Gulf Coast states, where the bacterium causes 30 to 40 illnesses each year, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Symptoms, including vomiting, cramping, diarrhea and chills, usually develop within 24 hours of ingestion and last no more than three days, according to the CDC. Thoroughly cooking seafood is the best way to prevent Vp infection.

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