Md. taking all the oyster shells

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COMMERCIAL TWP. — As oysters are harvested, a certain amount of empty shell also is dredged each year, depleting opportunities for recruitment of new oysters.

“It’s very clear that, over the long term, you can’t keep taking shell off and not putting it back,” said Eric Powell, director of the Haskin Shellfish research Laboratory, at Bivalve.

“I do believe we are still on track to see shell planting in 2005.”

That wasn’t soon enough for oysterman Scott Sheppard.

“Why are we backtracking now, when we’ve got money in the cultch fund to plant shells?” he asked.

Powell said he didn’t disagree, but, right now, thinks getting boats up to the Round Island seed bed to move 20 million oysters downbay for future harvest is a better use of the money.

Shell planting wouldn’t produce marketable oysters for at least two years, he said.

“Prudent use of the resource ultimately benefits the industry,” said Jim Joseph, chief of the Bureau of Shellfisheries.

“The industry is me,” Sheppard retorted.

Procurement of shells and red tape in awarding a contract to plant them are both problems.

Councilman Scott Bailey asked why barges of shells are going from New Jersey to Maryland.

Because Maryland has the money to buy them, he was told.

“There is no way we can compete with Maryland on the price of a bushel of shell. They will outbid us every time. We should investigate legislative action to give us first right to (New Jersey) shells,” Powell said.

Powell said Maryland gets from $8 to $20 million each year to spend on purchasing shells and will take anything they can buy with the money.

“Clam plants in Delaware are selling every shell to Maryland. That great sucking sound down in Maryland is them sucking all the shell out,” he said.

Revitalization of oyster seed beds in Delaware Bay, in conjunction with the Army Corps of Engineers, DRBA and the state of Delaware, probably won’t materialize until next year, but local oystermen aren’t waiting.

The Delaware Bay section of the state Shell Fisheries Council voted on Tuesday to allocate $50,000 for the planting of cultch — clean shell which is deposited on the bay bottom to provide a clean surface to which larval oysters can attach.

Spat set, the term used to describe the attachment and continued growth of new oysters, has been extremely low for the past four years, leaving no small oysters to grow to market size. The fear has been expressed that in 2005 the harvest may have to be suspended.

A multi-million project through the Corps of Engineers that will upgrade the seed beds has not yet begun and would not provide immediate relief, even if successful.

There is $138,663 in the Oyster Resource Development Account, generally called the “cultch fund,” funded by a tax oystermen imposed on themselves, for such projects and the $50,000 will come from that fund.

The council ultimately voted to allocate $50,000 to plant shells on Nantuxent and/or Beadon’s seed beds, this year if possible.

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