Oysters making slow comeback

By JOHANNA DUERR
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COMMERCIAL TOWNSHIP — After two dev-
astating blows from disease to the oyster industry
in the past 75 years, the latest occurring in 1996,
the oyster harvesting from the Delaware Bay has
begun to improve.

More regulations and time-consuming moni-
toring have rekindled a nearly extinct aquacul-
ture, but the harvest is nowhere near the num-
bers seen in the late 1980s, much less the 1920s.

They're "not out of the woods yet," said Eric
Powell, a researcher with the Rutgers University
Ocean and Coastal Sciences Research Lab in Bivalve.
Powell spoke Friday morning in an area the
oyster industry helped shape: this township's
Bivalve session, which was named after its
prime industry.

That, along with
Port Norris, which was
called "The
Oyster Capital of the
World," was one of the
main points for the
industry in New
Jersey, which had its
heyday in the 1920s.
Powell was part of a
press conference
highlighting the
Bayshore Discovery
Project and the New
Jersey Department of
State's "History Along
the Delaware:
Celebrating New
Jersey's Resources,
Culture and Heritage."
The program is a
tour around New
Jersey, and it made
Bivalve a stop Friday to highlight the oyster
industry and efforts to revive it.
The industry made millionaires out of locals
during its peak. From 1880 to 1957, production
was never lower than 1 million bushels a year.

Then MSX hit, virtually decimating the oyster
population. The industry began to stabilize, but
in 1990, another shellfish parasite, Dermo,
appeared.

Things were so bad that there wasn't even a
harvest during some years.

Since 1996, the state's oyster industry, one of
the country's biggest, has begun to make changes.

Above are spats, or ba-
y oysters, that are not
yet attached to an empty
oyster shell, like those
below.

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See Oysters, Page B5

Kristoffer Whitney, program coordinator for the Bayshore Discovery Pro-
ject, holds an empty shell with baby oysters, or spats, attached to it.

Oysters

(Continued from Page B1)

in how it harvests the oysters, making them less susceptible
to Dermo.

The project is a joint effort
with Rutgers, the state
Department of Environmental
Protection and the Shellfish
Council.

"Today we have a sustainable
industry and a sustainable
resource," said Powell.

But the new method, which
keeps the oysters upstream and
farther from heavy salinity,
also reduces the number of
oysters that fishermen can har-
vest.

Now the quota is less than
65,000 bushels a year, accord-
ing to Powell.

But they are still looking to
improve the industry and
improvement requires invest-
ment. It also requires the sup-
port of its industry members
and the local population.

Walt Canzoneri, a member of
the Maurice River Oyster
Foundation, said that since
the oyster industry was devastated,
unity between members is
lacking.

He said that they have the
potential for a minimum of
250,000 bushels a year in the
Delaware Bay with help.

Canzoneri recalled times
when busloads of industry
workers would head to Trenton
to lobby their cause. Today, he
said, he's lucky if he can get one
or two men together for a trip.

People also don't realize how
important and economically
viable the Delaware River is,
both he and Powell said.

At the current rate, the oyster
industry brings in about $15
million a year. By the time the
oysters make it to the mar-
ketplace, that number rises to
about $10 million to $12 mil-
lion for the local economy, said
Powell.

"That's the value of the bay
sitting out there," he said. "It's a
very big number."

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