Aquaculture: Arriving Here At Last

By JACK FICHTER

NORTH CAPE MAY — A new, $7.8 million, 52,000 square foot Aquaculture facility is under construction here on the Cape May Canal.

But operating expenses for the facility, off Bayshore Road behind the Channels Apartments, are not yet in place.

Known as the Rutgers Multi-Species Aquaculture Demonstration Facility, it will feature a large building with indoor tanks fed by water from Cape May Canal.

The purpose of the facility is to encourage the cultivation of clams and oysters as a farming industry. The plan is expected to be in operation in the spring of 2005.

A pump station and two large storage tanks, resembling silos, will hold saltwater while a third tank will hold filtered water for aquaculture tanks.

Plans originally called for 1520 outdoor ponds on the property, but that’s on hold because of lack of funding.

“The dream was to also have ponds outside, but I don’t think there is money for that right now,” said Mary Margaret Halsey, an associate director of Rutgers Institute of Marine and Coastal Sciences. “We have the land for the building as it is. What we don’t have is funding to operate.”

She said the funders of the project believed operating expenses were the responsibility of the state.

“We hope the legislators is going to step up in its next budget cycle to appropriate the funds to start to operate,” said Halsey.

“This demonstration facility (North Cape May) will go a step further to actually apply the research for mass cultivation,” she said.

“It’s one thing to do it in the lab, but it’s something else for farmers to do it on a large scale to be able to make money.

“Interested farmers, aquaculturists, would come and learn and be able to buy seed stock and go from there,” continued Halsey.

She said aquaculturists could raise shellfish in leased areas along the bay use ponds or even old quarry sites.

“If we can get farmers to be successful and profitable, it should create a lot of jobs, and new industry for the state,” said Halsey.

Mike DeLuca, senior associate director of Rutgers Institute of Marine and Coastal Sciences, said legislators indicated they wanted to see the building constructed before considering supporting operating costs.

He said ponds to raise fin fish such as striped bass could be added to the facility in the future.

Project plans date back to 1991, according to DeLuca, when Rutgers received a grant to conduct a feasibility study for aquaculture as an economic activity in New Jersey.

In 1994, construction dollars began coming in.

“We had nothing on the books in respect to aquaculture in New Jersey,” said DeLuca. “In fact, there were laws on the books that would preclude transport of eggs and larvae across state lines.”

A governor-appointed commission drafted an aquaculture plan and enabling legislation was passed. DeLuca said the permitting process including CAFRA (Coastal Area Facilities Review Act) took five years to complete.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers would not permit permanent intake pipes to bring water into the facility over concerns with interfering with dredging of the Cape May Canal, said DeLuca.

In 1997, former Congressman Bill Hughes spoke at ceremonies dedicating administrative offices for the facility on Delaware Avenue in Cape May with a planned opening date in 1998 for the North Cape May facility.

Halsey said the facility has been a “very long time coming.”

A total of $6 million was raised from federal and state monies and Public Service Electric and Gas.

“It needs a lot of legislative support for operating funds and political support in Trenton to help get it moving,” said Halsey.

A companion facility at Cumberland Community College will be used to train aquaculture farmers and technicians, said Halsey.

Rutgers is leasing 113 acres from Delaware River and Bay Authority on a 26-year lease with two options for 10 and 12 years, for $51,402 per year for five years. After five years, the lease payment will be adjusted by the Consumer Price Index, said DRBA spokesman James Salmon.

DeLuca praised DRBA for purchasing the property for Rutgers and “being a partner” in moving legislation forward and the permitting process.