The Oyster is their world

A glimmer of hope for the Delaware Bay shellfish

Jenny King, owner of King's in Shellpile, Cumberland County, says she has no trouble selling oysters. Still, she thinks the state is doing the right thing by managing the overall harvest of oysters.

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COMMERCIAL TOWNSHIP — Something's changed down in the Maurice River Cove.

They're finding oysters again on the Tonger's Bed, a shallow, protected area near the river's mouth.

"Last year was the first time we took oysters off there in 30 years," Millville oysterman Charlie Clark says.

Nobody's proclaiming a comeback yet for Delaware Bay's oysters, which struggle to survive throughout the bay. But more oysters are growing in more areas around the Maurice River, and oystermen have noticed.

"It's been slowly building over the last five years," said John Kraeuter, biologist and assistant director at Rutgers University's Haskin Shellfish Research Laboratory in Elverson. "You're more people in more places."

Some folks who gave up on oysters three decades ago are taking a second look, and that includes King's, a small fishing company struggling to adapt to the times.

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Smoke and flies linger in King's cramped office off the Maurice River docks at
Oysters

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Shellpile. The cigarette smoke floats; the flies stick to long strips of tape hanging from the ceiling. Eight-month-old Jenna Marie busies herself quietly in the pier.

Her mother, Jenny King, sits at a desk and speaks impatiently in a staccato, smoky voice to her employees, who slip in and out of the bright, windowed room on this clear October day.

"Can I get some money?" asks one oysterman, probably in his 50s.

King, a short, light-haired and pale-skinned woman in her 40s, pulls out a white bank envelope and hands him a twenty.

"You take it out of the paycheck later," she explains offhandedly. "These guys need it for lunch, to buy lunchmeat."

She looks over at her little girl while she's talking. Not enough time in the day.

The office door opens to the loading docks, which lead to cargo areas. Go farther, and you reach the water, the lifeblood of this business. This is Shellpile, a fishing village named for what it is.

Clark, the Millville oysterman, fishes here for nearly 30 years with Jack King, arguably the most well-known crab dealer in New Jersey. When King died three years ago, he left behind a business struggling to make ends meet on these Delaware Bay waters. The bay's crab population had dropped; King's took a hit.

"There's no money in crabs," Jenny King says.

Now she, Jack King's daughter-in-law, runs the show. Three years ago, she and her husband, Todd, owned a small trucking company that ran mostly to and from Canada. The terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, killed business by bottlenecking the border, so they sold it, she says.

They came back to Todd's roots in Shellpile in January 2002. He had helped build his dad's docks 30 years ago. With his father's death, the couple inherited and began rebuilding was down to one seaworthy boat. Ice sank the Mary Ann II; Time sank the Neil Johnson.

"Jack was the biggest crab dealer in New Jersey," King says. "I don't want to be the biggest. I want to have four or five crabbers. I'm interested in oysters."

Folks have been interested in Delaware Bay oysters since they fueled an early 20th century millionaires' row of oyster magnates in Port Norris, Fortescue and other bayshore communities.

But disease decimated the oyster population in the 1950s and turned hamlets into ghost towns.

By the 1970s, most oystermen had given up and moved on to crabs and other seafood. Going back to oysters isn't easy, because their population is still weak.

The state limits oystermen annually to 1,000 bushels of oysters per licensed boat. If you want to harvest more than that, you've to take out another boat, with a unique license. That meant King needed more boats. And more money to buy and fix them.

They now have four seaworthy vessels: the Almah, Jenna Marie, Lindbergh and Jimmy Gale. A $70,000 Cumberland Empowerment Zone grant covered half the Jimmy Gale's cost.

Today, the Almah can collect 100 bushels a day. The Lindbergh isn't far behind.

"That is a catching boat, but she's a leaker," King says of the Lindbergh. "She can outcatch anybody."

But a boat that takes in 100 bushels a day collects oysters only 10 days a year, if you do the math. It takes a few thousand dollars a year to keep each boat seaworthy, King says. Not exactly cost-effective.

"Right now, the state is running my business," she says. "I'm not running my business."

King thinks the state's doing the right thing by managing the overall harvest of oysters so the waters don't get overfished. Still, she would like to pool all her licenses on one or two boats so she doesn't have to let a boat sit unused for so long. As it is, she has to spend additional money to ready each boat for sea.
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**Oyster harvest**

King's seafood company, based in Shellpilie, harvested oysters off the Tongue's End at Maurice River Cove last year for the first time in 30 years.

“Once you get a boat working, it'll work,” King says. “I haven't had oysters for three weeks, I was between boats.”

So King presses on. Scientists continue seeking ways to breed and consistently reproduce a disease-resistant oyster. Oystermen keep coming from as far as Dennisville, Cape May and Deptford to work King's boats. Everyone's got an opinion on the oysters.

“You listen to the scientists, and then you listen to the old oystermen,” she says.

It's not clear whether she's optimistic. She doesn't want to talk about her profits, but business has improved the last year.

“You have no trouble selling an oyster,” King says.