No Vibrio in Bay oysters

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COMMERCIAL TWP. — Sometimes, no news is good news.

There have been no new cases of Vibrio polyhaemolyticus in 2003 or 2004, so far, and three years without any illnesses traced to Delaware Bay oysters will end monitoring, Bob Connell, of the Bureau of Marine Water Monitoring, told the Delaware Bay Section of the Shell Fisheries Council on Tuesday.

The Vibrio bacteria is found in all marine waters but the pathogenic strain which causes illness is less common. It can cause illness ranging from flu-like symptoms to explosive diarrhea, nausea, vomiting, abdominal cramps and on rare occasions septicemia, or blood infection. In extreme cases, it can cause death.

Local oystermen were alerted to its presence in Delaware Bay in 2002, after 16 illnesses were diagnosed in New York, Virginia and Las Vegas. They were traced back to their source through tags that must accompany all harvested oysters and two appeared to come from oysters harvested in Delaware Bay during June.

Local oystermen argued about the source, contending that unscrupulous brokers could have changed the tags on oyster containers to mask the fact that they came from other areas where disease has been a problem.

Subsequent monitoring by the state Bureau of Marine Water Monitoring did find the pathogenic strain of Vibrio on some oyster seed beds here.

"We need two years without illnesses and we can discontinue monitoring," Connell said. "We're halfway there."

Vibrio does not come from pollution or human waste and the conditions which produce the pathogenic strain have not been determined. It is killed by cooking. It is also found on crabs and lobsters but those are not eaten raw.

The fishery was shut down temporarily in 2002 and in 2003 stringent harvest regulations were put in place. Since Vibrio spreads rapidly under warm conditions, oystermen had to stop harvesting earlier in the day, cover deck cargo with a tarp and keep the oysters wet. Those precautions appear to have paid off.

The illness does not come from pollution and is not related to human activity. It usually appears when water temperature reaches 70 degrees.

It has also been found in crabs and lobsters, but it is destroyed by cooking and these are not consumed raw.

Sampling so far this year has identified no problem. Since oysters in the shell can be kept for some time, it is still possible that infected oysters could cause illness this year. Delaware Bay oysters have an excellent reputation for quality and a representative of the state Department of Health said last year that Delaware Bay oystermen appeared to be handling their catch properly.

The harvest was suspended this year from June 14 to 25, which was the time frame during which when oysters previously linked to illness were harvested. The current harvest is allowed from 6 a.m. until noon until July 15 and from 6 a.m. to 1 p.m. from July 15 to September 13.

"You were allowed 60 more hours of harvest time this year," Connell said.

In addition to covering oysters with light-colored tarps, the use of open mesh cages or bags also is recommended to allow air circulation.

If water sampling by the Bureau of Marine Water Monitoring determines that pathogenic levels exceed guidelines, or if a Vibrio outbreak is declared by the Department of Health and Senior Services, another closure of shellfish beds will occur. The beds also could be closed if it is found there is noncompliance with the measures that must be taken to lower the risk of contamination.

Connell said initial preliminary data indicates that there is a significant reduction in the Vibrio problem but a data base still needs to be built. Additional monitoring will be done later this month.

Caliope Alexander, of the N.J. Department of Health and Senior Services, said she visited oyster boats at Money Island and found they were using tarps to cover the oysters, as required.

"Canvas tarps, when wet, do a good job," she said. "If they were not using shading, they would be in violation of the code...New Jersey has a very good track record."