Oyster harvest still going down

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COMMERCIAL TWP. — Oystermen will share a much smaller harvest this year, due to five consecutive years of very low recruitment of new oysters and a dwindling resource.

After more than two hours of discussion, it was decided to recommend a harvest of 34,950 bushels, which is more than the 26,203 recommended by the Stock Assessment Review Committee but within the range of about 1 to 1.5 percent of standing stocks allocated in previous years.

Last year's allocation was almost 60,000 bushels.

The harvest will begin April 18.

Ship John and Cohansay Beds will not be harvested until after Aug. 1 to give the oysters there an opportunity to spawn first. A transplant will be made of oysters from Middle Beds to Shell Rock in early September.

The recommendations will need the approval of Commissioner of the Department of Environmental Protection Bradley Campbell.

In a presentation at the beginning of the meeting of the Delaware Bay Section of the Shell Fisheries Council on Monday, Dr. Eric Powell, director of the Haskin Shellfish Research laboratory, gave a presentation on the status of the resource from 1953 to present, comparing, among other things, recruitment numbers.

Recruitment is the number of new oysters spawned each year.

"Recruitment is now in the bottom 5 percent of all numbers since 1953," Powell said.

After a couple of productive years in the early 1970s, recruitment has dropped and in the early 90s the parasite Dermo appeared in the bay, further impacting the resource. Total abundance has been declining since 2000, he said.

"The big animals that are the brood stock are declining," Powell said.

He had no explanation for the five years of very low recruitment.

"It could be a different reason every year. It could be a run of bad luck," he said. "The total biomass out there capable of spawning is pretty stable. It is not because of (lack of) brood stock availability."