Oystermen reject estimates

By JEAN JONES
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COMMERCIAL TWP. — Oystermen are complaining that there are more oysters on Delaware Bay seed beds than the science experts had estimated and their harvest quotas should be increased.

At the Tuesday meeting of the Delaware Bay Section of the Shell Fisheries Council, oystermen Kenneth Bailey told the council that there are big oysters on some of the beds that are closed to harvesting.

"For years, you said the big oysters die first and we need to catch them. Now you say we have to leave them so they can reproduce. They're going to die and we'll lose part of the resource," he said.

The recommendation this year had been to close those beds to preserve the biomass for spawning.

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"The lab is looking as long and hard as they can with the money they have," Joseph said.

Oysterman Steve Fleetwood, also a council member, told Joseph that there is a good stock of oysters on the Ship John, Shell Rock and Bennies Sand beds and the committee's estimates don't hold water.

"You're telling us what to do and you don't know what you're talking about," he told Joseph.

"Fall random sampling is the only systematic, quantitative information we have," Joseph responded.

Sheppard said he has harvested more oysters in the first few days of the season this year than he has in the past couple of years.

"And the bottom is cleaner than I've seen it in the last few years. There's no grass," he said.

A cleaner bottom is more conducive to the "setting" of larval oysters, a term used to describe their attachment to a hard surface for continued growth. The lack of a substantial set for the past five years is one of the causes of the reduced resource, so a cleaner bottom is good news.

Another oysterman said he got his quota in 10 days last year. This year's quota of 26,000 bushels for the entire Delaware bay industry, less than half last year's quota of about 60,000, will be reached in about four days. He wondered if it was worth it to even keep his boat operating for that amount.

The council had sought to increase the quota to 35,000 bushels, but the increase was mixed by DEP Commissioner Bradley Campbell.