Oyster bacteria is at all-time high

By JEAN JONES
Staff Writer

COMMERCIAL TWP. — The ban on the harvest of shellfish in Delaware bay has been continued because of additional tests which showed record-high levels of Vibrio polyhaemolyticus (Vp).

The bay was closed to the oyster harvest on June 24, but could have reopened as early as July 4 if subsequent tests showed the level was back down.

That didn’t happen.

“There are two tests we do,” said Bob Connell, chief of the Bureau of Marine Water Monitoring. “One is for Vibrio polyhaemolyticus and the other is for all strains of Vibrio. The samples failed the acceptable test."

Vp is a bacterium found in all marine waters and it generally is harmless, but there is a pathogenic strain which shows up sometimes, usually during June, which can cause illness if shellfish are eaten raw.

Delaware Bay oystermen already take extra precautions with their harvest, stopping the harvest at noon, keeping oysters on deck wet and covered with a tarpaulin and getting them into refrigeration as soon as possible after they are offloaded.

There has been no illness attributed to the higher levels and Connell said it is in the industry’s best interests to continue the ban.

“We are testing again tomorrow,” he said Tuesday. “If the tests come up OK, they can reopen the bay. We may know by Friday.”

However, Connell cautioned that the samples showed high levels of the bacterium.

“The levels are up there. The count for the pathogenic strain is the highest we’ve measured since we’ve started testing,” he said.

Testing for Vp began in 2001. When it was found in Delaware Bay in 2002 the bay was also closed temporarily, but was reopened after subsequent tests showed acceptable levels.

Vp had remained at acceptable levels for most of the three-year monitoring period to which the bay was subjected after an illness was attributed to oysters that may have come from Delaware Bay in 2002.