DRBA gives more for oyster project

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LOWER TOWNSHIP — The Delaware River and Bay Authority is increasing its contributions to bring back the Delaware Bay oyster industry.

The DRBA, which runs the Cape May-Lewes Ferry, this week authorized $134,200 in matching funds for the project. This money is helping draw $2 million in federal funding for a project that began last year with the placement of 280,000 bushels of clamshells on the bay bottom. The shells provide a surface for larval oysters to attach and grow.

"The shell planting program is now the single most critical endeavor necessary to maintain the ecological integrity of Delaware Bay, along with the economic benefits that come from harvesting its resources," said Eric Powell, director of Rutgers University's Haskin Shellfish Research Laboratory in Cumberland County.

The effort teams several state and federal agencies that hope to revitalize the industry. The projected economic benefit of the 2005 planting program is $12.7 million if the oyster growth is realized. The Partnership for the Delaware Estuary, one of many groups involved, estimates the shell planting could eventually create a $60 million per year industry in the states of New Jersey and Delaware.

DRBA Executive Director James Johnson Jr. said the agency was happy to provide funding. The DRBA was scheduled to give only $50,000 this year.

"The authority is proud of this initiative," Johnson said.

The oyster industry historically produced more than 1 million bushels of the shellfish per year before a succession of diseases took their toll. Congress approved $2 million for the project, but it also relies on matching funds. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Rutgers University, the New Jersey DEP, Delaware's Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control, Delaware Estuary Program, Delaware River Basin Commission, and the oyster industry itself, in both New Jersey and Delaware, are others contributing to the project.