Delaware Bay oystermen to harvest more oysters

By DANIEL WALSH
Staff Writer, (856) 794-5111

COMMERCIAL TOWNSHIP — Oystermen will likely have nearly twice the oyster quota this year as last year, thanks largely to shell-planting efforts in the Delaware Bay.

The annual Delaware Bay stock assessment, made public Tuesday by the Delaware Bay Shell Fisheries Council, found oyster populations remain troubled.

While oysters that exist in the bay typically have a solid biomass, population amounts remain comparatively small, according to Eric Powell, head of Rutgers University's Haskin Shellfish Research Laboratory.

Essentially, young oysters in most parts of the bay have trouble attaching to shells and growing past infancy.

"Who knows, maybe the bay's not going to recover for a long time," Powell said. "We don't know the reasons behind it."

However, there are significant signs of hope, and that's what prompted the higher quota.

The oyster harvest will start April 11 and run through November, with boats estimated to have a quota of more than 800 bushels apiece, the council determined Tuesday.

A small shell-planting in 2003 off Reeds Beach in Cape May will produce an estimated 13,000 bushels of market-size oysters this year. That comprises about one fourth of the 52,232-bushel quota set Tuesday night.

The pilot program entailed spending $25,000 to drop fresh shell from clams, ocean quahog and other shellfish off Reeds Beach, a high salinity area west of Cape May County.

Oysters have shown significantly higher recruitment rates in these higher salinity areas, but large amounts of predators here have routinely killed oysters shortly after recruitment, or the attachment to shell. In this case, the oysters were moved further up the bay, just off Ben Davis Point in Cumberland County, where the lack of predators allowed them to grow to market size.

That successful pilot program gave biologists the evidence they needed to obtain more than $700,000 for a much larger shell-planting last summer and another $2.2 million for shell-planting this year.

Recruitment in some of these areas was as high as 10 times the normal rate, according to state biologists. When these oysters grow to the 3-inch market size in two years, they could produce another 60,000 bushels and double the existing oyster quota.

"It's a very substantial impact with a minimal investment of money," Powell said.

It was the first large-scale shell-planting in decades. Oyster populations have flagged for several decades, due to epidemics of MSX in the early 1960s and Dermo in the 1990s. Disease-caused deaths have dropped the last few years, but recruitment rates remain low in most areas, which is why the oyster industry continues to work with biologists to find optimal growing conditions.

Several local oystermen will spend two weeks in April helping state and Rutgers biologists move several thousand bushels of oysters from bay waters near the mouth of the Delaware River further south into the bay. Oysters in the northern waters breed relatively well because of the lack of predators but don't grow large because of a lack of food and the nearby freshwater from the river.

To e-mail Daniel Walsh at The Press:

DWalsh@pressofac.com