Oysters rebound after DEP bay project

The DEP reopens the Bennies Sand seedbed. Now commercial fishermen can harvest market-size oysters again.

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A $25,000 investment in shells is about to reap a ton of money around Port Norris.

New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection Commissioner Lisa P. Jackson on Thursday reopened the oyster seedbed used for a successful pilot program producing thousands of new oysters. For the first time in two years, commercial fishermen will be able to harvest market-size oysters planted on a 6-acre stretch of the Bennies Sand seedbed, in the Delaware Bay off Cumberland County.

These oysters are unique because they began as oyster spat well to the east, off the Cape May County shore near Reeds Beach. The DEP put down a $25,000 investment in 2003 to plant fresh shell to which oyster larvae, or spat, attached at a rate 81 times greater than normal production rates. DEP and Rutgers University-biologists worked with local oystermen to collect the oyster spat after recruitment and move them to Bennies Sand, which has fewer natural predators.

This year, those oysters have grown to the 3-inch market size. Biologists anticipated in the annual Stock Assessment Report that more than 13,000 bushels of oysters will be harvested this year from this one small tract, comprising about a quarter of the bay's total harvest. Their expected dockside value: $468,000 to $530,000, according to the DEP.

"Pretty good return on an investment, huh?" said Jim Joseph, chief of the DEP's Bureau of Shell Fisheries.

Oysters and glass-making were once the heart of Cumberland County's economy, but each industry is a shadow of what it was here 70 years ago.

Oyster magnates turned Port Norris, Fortescue and Seabreeze into "millionaires' rows" back then. Also, oysters serve a key ecological role as a natural filter in the bay.

Disease has decimated the oyster business in the past half-century, however, with MSX ravaging populations in the late 1950s and early 1960s and Dermo striking in the 1990s. Dermo still exists in the bay, but biologists attribute most of the problems to a lack of recruitment, or the process of oyster spat attaching to shells. Some, such as retired Rutgers oyster expert Walt Canzonier, had long theorized that what the bay needed most was new shell, untarnished by other shellfish.

This year's harvest should prove a shot in the arm to a beleaguered industry and the best evidence to state and federal lawmakers that it's worth investing government money in shell-planting, according to Eric Powell, head of Rutgers' Haskin Shellfish Research Laboratory. Early returns on the 2003 pilot project helped state Assemblyman Doug Fisher, D-Salem, Gloucester, Cumberland, and U.S. Rep. Frank LoBiondo, R-2nd, secure more than $2 million from the state and federal governments for more shell-planting efforts. A wider planting project began last summer.

"Revitalization has strengthened the oyster population and given a boost to the industry, which is important to the economy of New Jersey's bayshore region," Jackson said.

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