Aquaculture facility runs into new problems

The government supplied funds to build an aquaculture facility in Cape May County but nothing to operate it. Organizers may branch off into some innovative initiatives, including growing horseshoe crabs.

BY RICHARD DEGENE
Staff Writer, (609) 463-6711

LOWER TOWNSHIP — An aquaculture facility that was supposed to open on the banks of the Cape May Canal years ago has run into new problems as it nears completion, and one of them is the lack of an operating budget.

When Congress approved $3.5 million in funding for the $7 million project back in 1994, it was projected to open by the year 2000. The joint venture between Rutgers University and Cumberland County College, bankrolled by several government agencies, has been delayed by construction and permitting issues.

The project recently got $252,000 from the Casino Reinvestment Development Authority, or CRDA, to solve a problem with the water intake system and other last-minute issues. Ice on the Cape May Canal this past winter damaged the water intake system.

The bigger issue, however, is that a facility nearing completion has no funding to operate.

The Multispecies Aquaculture Demonstration Facility, which was projected to open in 2000, has been plagued by setbacks.

Fish
(Continued from Page CI)

operate. John Kraeutler, a Rutgers University biologist trying to get the project off the ground, said it needs about $350,000 during the first year. Nothing is budgeted.

“We need a minimum number of people to make things work. That was always thought to be coming through Rutgers, and Rutgers gets its funding from the Legislature. That’s what they’re working on now,” Kraeutler said on Monday.

The Multispecies Aquaculture Demonstration Facility is supposed to have many functions, from helping the commercial fishing industry learn how to raise finfish and shellfish to educating college students. It also could be used for scientific research and take on innovative projects. One project already under discussion is growing horseshoe crabs to bolster the population of a species that each spring provides eggs for migrating shorebirds to eat.

“We have a number of projects that could benefit from it. We hesitated to write grants (proposals) until it’s up and running. I’d just love to see the water flowing,” Kraeutler said.

The facility is designed to use seawater from the canal to grow a variety of finfish and shellfish. It could provide disease-resistant strains of oyster seed to revive an industry that once flourished in the Delaware Bay. In 1994, the U.S. Department of Commerce kicked in $3.5 million amid hopes of creating new jobs for fishermen. The N.J. Commission on Science and Technology contributed $2 million for construction while $1.5 million came from Rutgers University and $200,000 from Public Service Electric & Gas. The Delaware River and Bay Authority supplied land for the project.

Kraeutler said there are no operating funds for 2007 but there is hope of a special appropriation from Trenton.

“Money is tight, very, very tight,” he noted.

J. Frederick Grassle, who directs Rutgers University’s Institute of Marine and Coastal Sciences, said the university has been “hit heavily” by state budget problems and is feeling embarrassed” by delays at the aquaculture facility. In December 2004, Rutgers said the facility would open that upcoming summer. Grassle said this year’s deadline for growing shellfish seed will be missed but he said the facility will be in operation in 2008.

“Things that we thought were taken care of weren’t,” Grassle said.

Michael DeLuca, senior associate director for Rutgers University’s Institute of Marine and Coastal Sciences, said the latest construction issue was solved with CRDA funding when the water-intake system had to be redesigned to handle ice on the canal. DeLuca said there also were some last-minute plumbing and security issues.

DeLuca said discussions with state lawmakers, and the Department of Agriculture, are ongoing to find a stable source of funding to operate the facility. DeLuca said federal funding also is being sought. One idea is to open the facility to the private sector for fees that would help run it.

DeLuca said there also have been discussions with the state Department of Environmental Protection and the New Jersey Audubon Society about producing horseshoe crabs. Populations of some migrating shorebirds, including the red knot, are in decline partly from a reduction of horseshoe crab eggs blamed on over-harvesting by commercial fishermen, who use the “king crabs” as bait to catch eel and conch.

One reason the project has
Among the many setbacks the aquaculture facility has experienced is the damage to its water-intake structure caused by ice in the Cape May Canal this past winter.

taken so many years is a state plan for aquaculture had to be created to guide operation of the facility. The Department of Agriculture has historically supported aquaculture while the state DEP has raised questions about how it impacts the environment. It took years to get the necessary environmental permits.

"Years were consumed by putting together the legislative structure and meeting permit requirements. It's a novel and innovative facility," DeLuca said.