Fishermen making Delaware Bay hospitable for oysters

The first small boats will begin today in the southern parts of the bay, while heavy barges will move up from Maryland next week, according to state biologists. All told, about 500,000 bushels of clean shell will be dumped in the bay to give long-struggling oyster populations more fresh breeding grounds.

This marks the third year of the effort, and so far there have been clear positive results, according to state and Rutgers University biologists. "This isn't rocket science," said Russ Bab, one of the state Department of Environmental Protection biologists who oversees the program. "We know it's been done in the past. The industry has done it to an extent. But there were no metrics."

Now, biologists are starting to collect those statistics that show what's happening. This year's total oyster harvest quota is up to 80,000 bushels, three times what it was two years ago.

A 2003 pilot program to plant clean shell produced drastically increased oyster counts on the seed bed on which it was used, and those oysters began going to market last year. Last year, half the oysters in the 600-acre Bennie's Sand oyster bed came from one 25-acre area of water where this pilot program was focused.

The problem in the bay has for years been that oyster spat—or larvae—were not properly attaching to clean shell, a process called recruitment, and growing to maturity. So state officials tried planting clean shell in one area where recruitment proved high, and then moved the young oysters after recruitment to an area where recruitment was low but those oysters already set had few natural predators.

For more than a century, the Delaware Bayshore region's economy thrived on a foundation of the oyster industry, along with sandmining and glassmaking businesses. In the late 1950s, the MSX disease struck the bay and wiped out its oyster populations. In the 1980s, another disease, dermo, gutted the populations again.

Few sustained and coordinated industrywide efforts were taken to bolster the oyster populations until the DEP's 2003 pilot program provided the data needed to leverage federal funding.

U.S. Rep. Frank LoBiondo, R-2nd, Assemblyman Doug Fisher, D-Cumberland, Salem, Gloucester, and U.S. Sen. Frank Lautenberg, D-N.J., proved key in securing several years' worth of federal funding for a broad shell-planting effort. That money leveraged other funds, such as the $135,000 being pitched this year by the Delaware River and Bay Authority.

This year, the federal government is contributing $2 million toward the effort. The shell being planted this summer was paid for with last year's money.

State officials and oystermen hope the funds will eventually become self-sustaining, thanks to a $2-per-bushel fee charged to oystermen. That money goes right back into the pool, so as oyster harvests increase thanks to shell-planting, so does the pool of money used to pay for more shell-planting.

"Continued expansion of the oyster industry is critical to New Jersey," Lautenberg said last week. "Increased oyster production will have a real economic impact in our state, especially in Salem, Cumberland and Cape May counties."

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