Conservation bid replenishes stocks, shores up reefs

Delaware Bay’s oysters are on their way back

DOVER, Del. - The Delaware Bay oyster population, decimated by disease and overfishing in recent decades, is on the rebound, according to scientists involved in a bay-wide restoration project.

> But officials with the Delaware Bay Oyster Restoration Project, a cooperative effort by government and nonprofit agencies in Delaware and New Jersey, warn that another round of federal funding is needed to ensure success.

> The project is a two-pronged effort designed to attract, or "recruit," baby oysters and to build and sustain the oyster-reef habitat throughout the bay.

> To achieve those goals, boatloads of clam and ocean quahog shells have been dumped onto reefs in recent years, providing a clean shell substrate for baby oysters, or spat, to latch onto and grow.

> "The program has been far more successful than I originally thought it would be when we started," said Rick Cole, fisheries program manager for the Delaware Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control.

> In addition to satisfying seafood lovers and providing an economic boost for commercial fishermen, oysters filter water, thus improving the bay's water quality. The oyster beds also serve as reef habitat for other species.

> According to Eric Powell, director of Rutgers University's Haskins Shellfish Research Laboratory, last year was the first time since 1999 that the oyster beds had been in balance, with natural reef loss offset by the addition of new shell.

> "We did not lose habitat this year," Powell said. He also cited an uptick last year in oyster recruitment, which dropped to a historic low in 2000 and remained low for seven years.
"This period of seven consecutive years is vastly longer than any other such period in the known history of the bay," he said. "It put the bay in a very dangerous situation."

But the population of native Eastern oysters had been struggling long before that. One of the key setbacks was the oyster disease MSX, which struck in the 1950s. In the 1990s, another disease called Dermo began taking its toll. After the initial die-off, succeeding oyster populations were unable to generate enough shells from dead oysters to maintain the shell beds on which future generations could grow.

To help build up the reefs, the shell-planting program was established in 2004 with initial federal funding, administered by the Army Corps of Engineers, capped at $5 million. The federal funds, which have reached their maximum, were matched by local and regional resources, including a per-bushel harvest fee for fishermen of $1.25 in Delaware and $2 in New Jersey.

While Delaware's quota, about 11,200 bushels this year, has remained relatively stable since it was halved in 2003 because of disease loss, officials say they expect the quota for New Jersey this year to be the third-highest since 1990.

While the last of the initial federal funding has been used to buy an additional 450,000 bushels of shell for planting starting in mid-June, officials are awaiting word on a new round of funding, which they say is critical to the project.

"We've hardly gotten through a single generation, and in order to get this bay up and operating the way it should be, we really need a shell-planting program that goes through multiple generations," Powell said.