Despite Success, Delaware Bay Oyster Project in Limbo

By Shaun Bailey

Delaware Bay oysters have survived a lot: climate change, habitat loss, harvest pressure, recruitment problems; the list goes on. They have even survived bouts of oyster disease, such as MSX since the 1950s and Dermo since the 1970s.

Today, however, a new obstacle threatens to slow the resource's recovery, and that barrier is funding. And it's coming at a time when experts working to restore the species are experiencing significant short-term success.

Without additional funding, the four years of progress made by the bi-state Delaware Bay Oyster Restoration Project could slow considerably, creating an uncertain future for Delaware Bay's Eastern oyster population, as well as the many businesses and communities that have staked their livelihoods on the shellfish industry for more than a century.

Since 2005, the Delaware Bay Oyster Restoration Task Force has strategically placed, or "planted," almost 2 million bushels of clam and oyster shells onto historic reefs in Delaware Bay, thanks to $5 million provided by Congress and administered by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

It has done so to achieve two objectives: 1. enhance survival by providing clean surfaces to which juvenile oysters can attach, or "recruit," and grow; and 2. maintain the ecology of the bay by sustaining oyster reefs.

This program has successfully stabilized the Delaware Bay's supply of shells. In fact, 2007 was the first year since 1999 that the oyster shell resource has been in equilibrium or increased. More importantly, there has been a substantial increase in the survival of juvenile oysters.

The projected harvest quota for 2008 is now the third-highest since the mid-1980s, and the estimated impact of the 2007 fiscal-year program alone is $90 million--equating to more than $40 for every federal dollar invested.

This success garnered the attention of the Water Resources Association of the Delaware River Basin, which bestowed the task force with its 2008 Government Award on April 14.

"It is absolutely vital that Congress and the states of Delaware and New Jersey continue to support the Delaware Bay Oyster Restoration Project," says Dr. Eric Powell, (continued on page 3)
"Oyster Project" (continued from front page)

director of Rutgers University's Haskin Shellfish Research Laboratory in Bivalve, Port Norris.

"It has proven to be a wise investment economically and, at the same time, a great benefit to the Delaware Estuary's ecosystem."

Without continued shell plantings, the health of many oyster habitats will decline as reduced recruitment robs them of their most important living component—baby oysters, this, in turn, limits the production of new shell. This will perpetuate a downward spiral resulting in the eventual loss of the very substrate oyster communities depend upon.

Once larval oysters are lost to the currents, so too are their ecological benefits. They will never have an opportunity to serve as valuable habitat or food for other sea life. And they will never get the chance to improve the water quality of Delaware Bay by filtering up to 50 gallons of water per day, per adult oyster.

As it currently stands, the Delaware Bay Oyster Restoration Project will exhaust the last of its federal funding at the end of the fiscal year, on Sept. 30, 2009.

Until then, the task force will use the remainder of its funds for limited transplants and scientific monitoring at each of its shell-planting sites.

Task force leaders are currently pursuing every lead available to them in an effort to raise new funds.

The Delaware Bay Oyster Restoration Task Force is a collaborative group of 10 public and private member-organizations, one of which is the Partnership for the Delaware Estuary.

For more information, visit DelawareEstuary.org or contact me at 1-800-445-4935, ext. 113, or Sbailey@DelawareEstuary.org

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The Partnership is an umbrella organization seeking to protect and nurture the natural resources and the economics based on them spanning the length of the Delaware River and Bay in a four-state area. The Delaware Bay Oyster Restoration Task Force is a collaborative group of 10 public and private member-organizations, one of which is the Partnership.

Tons of oyster and clam shells are dumped overboard, or "planted," so that oyster larvae have an underwater surface to attach to and grow in Delaware Bay.

Oysters from Delaware Bay are still being harvested but nowhere near in the vast numbers they used to be.