Study's authors: Bay oysters safe

(Published: Tuesday, June 17, 2008)

As co-authors of a scientific study featured in the June 8 story, "Bacteria lives on a half shell/Potentially deadly strains found in oysters, Delaware Bay water," we would like to draw attention to a few key points that were not presented so that readers are not misled about the implications of our research.

The safety of consuming Delaware Bay oysters is evident by a few important pieces of epidemiological information. Namely, despite the rather dire consequences that the bacteria we identified can have on individuals with compromised immune systems, we are not aware of anyone who has ever contracted infections from these bacteria by consuming raw shellfish from the Delaware Bay or elsewhere.

This is also true for anyone who has been using Delaware Bay in any other way (e.g., swimming, fishing, boating). Consequently, no warnings about shellfish or Delaware Bay have been issued, and none is warranted based on our findings. Although the portion of the study your paper reported on has just now been published in the scientific literature, our survey of the Delaware Bay was completed more than two years ago. Had any of our findings represented an imminent risk to human health, we would have reported them immediately to health officials.

Finally, the Delaware Bay industry is to be commended for its proactive stance of voluntarily shutting down harvest during the peak period of potential risk to consumers of raw oysters. The industry has been conducting these closures for several years in its own interest to protect public health, and the closures are in no way related to the findings of our study. The target audience of our study is the regulators who routinely monitor the waters of the Delaware Bay and elsewhere so that they may be proactive by adding these species to the list that they routinely monitor. Our research continues to develop improved test methods for these bacteria in order to support state efforts to monitor shellfish-harvesting areas.

GARY RICHARDS

DAVID BUSHEK

Dover, Del.

(Gary Richards is the lead scientist for the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Agricultural Research Service, North Atlantic Area, Eastern Regional Research Center, and David Bushek is assistant professor at Haskin Shellfish Research Laboratory.)