Illness closes oyster fishery

By RICHARD PEARSELL
Courier-Post Staff

There was no joy in Port Norris as the state Department of Environmental Protection shut down the oyster fishery Tuesday because of two cases of a stomach illness traced to oysters harvested from the Delaware Bay.

"That's the life we live," said a distraught Steve Fleetwood, an oysterman and manager of the Hiiand Bloom Packing Co. in Port Norris, the center of oyster fishing on the bay. "This doesn't involve me and I don't have any information on it yet, but we're all shut down."

The DEP suspended the shellfish harvest in the bay Tuesday after state health officials confirmed two cases of illness from a bacterium, vibrio paraheamolyticus — described by the DEP as "naturally occurring" and "not related to human waste or pollution."

The bacterium "thrives under warm temperatures," the DEP said, and "is typically linked to oysters and other seafood harvested raw during the summer months."

Tuesday's suspension originated from a Maryland restaurant that gets its oysters from the Delaware Bay, officials at the N.J. Department of Health and Human Services said.

Oystering is an old trade on the Delaware Bay, treasured today as a part of New Jersey history as well as a provider of a seafood delicacy.

About 70 boats are licensed to dredge the bay for oysters, most of them operating out of Port Norris, on the Maurice River. Together, the boats harvest about 90,000 bushels a year.

That is down sharply from the industry's peak in the early 20th century, when schooners sailed the bay and brought in as many as two million bushels a year.

But the industry has staged a comeback in recent years, recovering from a pair of major parasite attacks, which struck in the 1950s and again in the 1990s.

The parasites devastated the oysters themselves, but are not harmful to human beings, unlike the bacterium at issue today.

The vibrio paraheamolyticus bacterium can lead to gastrointestinal illness, the DEP said, especially in people with compromised immune systems.

The symptoms of the illness include diarrhea, nausea, vomiting and abdominal cramps, and, less frequently, the DEP said, headache, fever and chills.

It can also lead to an infection in the bloodstream, although that is rare, the DEP said.

Darlene Yuhas, a spokeswoman for the DEP, said that the department acted to protect public health after receiving the reports from the health department.

Dawn Thomas, a spokeswoman for the health department, said that the cases originated from a Maryland restaurant that gets its oysters from the Delaware Bay.

"Maryland alerted us to the cases, one of which involved a Maryland resident, the other a Delaware resident," Thomas said.

Yuhas said that the suspension is temporary but indefinite at this point, pending further testing of shellfish from the bay.

The area of the suspension extends from Artificial Island to the mouth of the Maurice River and covers about 130 square miles.

In the 1950s a parasite called MSX devastated the oyster industry, destroying more than 90 percent of the harvestable oysters on the bay's bottom.

Then in the 1990s another parasite, known as dermo, struck.

Jeff Tittel, the head of the New Jersey chapter of the Sierra Club, took issue Tuesday with the DEP's assertion that the appearance of the bacterium in the bay has nothing to do with pollution.

"They stressed that the bacterium thrives in warm water," Tittel said of the DEP. "But what is making the water warm? We would argue that overdevelopment of the watershed is a contributing factor. This has not been an exceptionally warm summer."

Reach Richard Pearsall at (856) 466-2466 or rpearsall@courierpostonline.com