Oystermen aboard the Mary Ann sort oysters Thursday in the Delaware Bay. The Delaware Bay Oyster Restoration Project has helped bring back the oyster population in the bay.

Oyster program nearly out of money

Backers say shell planting returns $40 per $1 spent
Oysters
(Continued from C1)

ously found only in southern waters that has moved up the Atlantic Coast as ocean temperatures have warmed. The disease kills oysters, which means not as many oysters producing as much shell of their own. Oysters not only produce shell, but young oysters need shell to attach to in order to grow to maturity.

Shell-planting can offset this. Dump thousands of bushels of clam shells into the bay, and it's just as if the oysters were producing it themselves. Fledgling oysters have the chance to grow to maturity.

Six years ago, a pilot program by the state Department of Environmental Protection allowed massive gains in oyster survival if provided more shell. Rutgers and others joined to successfully lobby for large-scale shell-planting, but in order to get the funding relatively quickly, it came through a federal program that was capped, according to Jason Galanes, a spokesman for U.S. Rep. Frank LoBiondo, R-2nd, who has sought federal funding. Then-DEP commissioner Brad Campbell initiated matters with $300,000 in state funding, and the federal government came in with the Army Corps funding, secured by the New Jersey and Delaware congressional delegations.

The shell-planting appears to have been effective. In 2005, the first mass shell-planting took place. Oysters take about three years to grow to maturity, and in 2008, the oyster harvest was the third largest since the mid-1980s.

To those making the case, it is a simple matter of commonsense economics.

The drawback has been that when the program was initiated, there were hopes it would be self-sustaining within five years. A $2 per bushel tax on oystermen goes directly to planting fresh shell that also costs about $2 per bushel.

But it was not until about 2005 that researchers learned just how fast oyster shell was degrading — about 400,000 to 500,000 bushels every year were disappearing, according to Powell. A recent study on the James River in Virginia found similar rates, Powell said.

Dermo is killing too many oysters, rendering them unable to produce their own shell.

So they are coming back to the government, looking for funding for an initiative that is both ecological and industrial in nature.

At the federal level, there are a few options, Galanes said. One is to get a waiver for the $5 million funding cap, but that can only happen as part of a federal water resources bill, which is not passed every year, he said. One could move through Congress next spring, however.

The second option is to go through standard Army Corps channels to initiate a shell-planting program, but that would require a tremendous amount of preparation to meet all the regulatory requirements, something that could take more than five years before any money is released, according to Galanes.

That leaves the state government and some local agencies, which have helped a lesser levels in the past.

The effort has support from biologists, businessmen, environmentalists and legislators such as state Sen. Jeff Van Drew Cape May, Cumberland, Atlantic, who was at Thursday's roundtable chat in Port Norris.

The House honored the project with its Coast America Partnership Award which will be presented Sunday. It has few, if any, public detractors, in part because of the ecological benefits. Because oysters serve as a natural filter, they are viewed as an environmental plus for the bay. Harbor House, which opened in 2005 and employs about 100 people, even recycles the shells it shucks, dumping them back into the bay so young oysters can reuse them.

Van Drew sees government investment in shell-planting as a job-creator and environmental plus. He echoed Mackey in pitching it as a perfect response to a weak economy, but he acknowledged the difficulty in swaying southern New Jersey legislators who may not understand the Delaware Bayshore economy or have never visited the area.

"You can't borrow your way out of this (bad economy)," he said. "You can't spend your way out of this. You can't tax your way out of this. You have to invest."

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