GREENWICH — A few million pounds of shells are creating hundreds of millions of oysters in the Delaware Bay.

The oyster industry has a long tradition in Cumberland County communities along the bay.

At the beginning of this decade, the shellfish’s population had reached its lowest numbers in 50 years due to a variety of factors, including disease and the climate.

But the numbers have turned around markedly in the past five years due to a collaborative effort by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Rutgers University, the state Department of Environmental Protection and local fishermen.

Through the Delaware Bay Oyster Task Force, these organizations have spent roughly $61 million since 2004 to place clean shells in the bay to provide baby oysters with a suitable habitat. The shells are placed in only 15 percent of the oysters’ home in the bay, but officials say the effort leads to a 25 percent increase in the bay’s entire oyster population every year.

The project will be awarded the 2006 Coastal America Partnership Award at a ceremony Sunday at University of Delaware. It’s the only environmental award given by the White House.

Kathy Alcox, a field researcher for Haskin Shellfish Research Laboratory at Rutgers’ New Jersey Agriculture Experiment Station in Port Norris, said there are 1.6 billion oysters in the state’s section of the Delaware Bay.

The task force’s staff has placed about 300,000 bushels of shells in the bay each year since 2005. Each bushel is about 70 to 80 pounds of shells, she said.

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A boat harvests oysters Thursday in the Delaware Bay. A government-funded program has helped boost the local oyster industry.
Oysters

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Hearon, a fisheries biologist with the state Division of Fish and Wildlife, said through the other revenue sources the program still expects to dump 100,000 bushels of shells into the bay annually.

The state of Delaware has made similar contributions on its side of the bay, officials said.

Eric Powell, director of the Haskin lab's Aquaculture Technology Transfer Center, said oysters are an essential part of the bay's ecosystem. Baby oysters require a clean surface in the water to attach to so they can grow, Powell said, adding they need the new shells because many potential habitats in the bay are dirty due to the muddy bottom.

Powell said every $1 invested in the program translates into about $40 for the economy in the local oyster-fishing community.

"It's hard to find a program that pays dividends at that level," he said.

Steve Fleetwood, owner of Bivalve Packing Co. in Port Norris, said he employs about 30 people at his company, which ships oysters across the country.

"It's been good and getting better," he said of the program. "The whole cooperative element has been very commendable. We've made a lot bigger impact than other places."