Effective oyster program soon to run out of cash
Proponents contend shell planting returns $40 for every $1 invested

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COMMERCIAL TOWNSHIP
— Invest $1, get a $40 return. Improve the ecology. Eat.
Sound like a good investment?
Biologists and fishermen think so. So apparently does the White House.
But due to government restrictions, there may be no more federal funding for a shell-planting program in the Delware Bay proponents say has done all those things by starting to restore oyster populations.
Federal funding through the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has hit a predetermined $5 million cap, and now the Delaware Bay Oyster Restoration Project cannot go for more. It still has about $700,000, but that will last only so long.
"You think of all the stimulus money that's being spent," said Eric Powell, director of Rutgers University's Haskin Shellfish Research Laboratory. "I defy you: You won't find a single investment that will get you a $40 return for every dollar spent."

Powell and others gathered Oct. 1 at Harbor House Seafood in Port Norris to articulate a case for more funding for shell-planting efforts. Whether it comes from the state or federal government doesn't matter to them.
"When we heard Gove. Corzine say that he was going to grow his way out of this problem, this is a perfect industry to do this," said Scott Mackey, of the Garden State Seafood Association.
Their case goes like this.
Oyster populations have been decimated since 1990 by Dermo, an oyster disease previously 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 showed massive gains in oyster survival if provided more shell. Rutgers and others joined in to successfully lobby for a large-scale shell-planting, but in order to get the funding relatively quickly, it came through a funding option 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 had effects. 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 common sense economics. The drawback has been that, when the program was initiated, there were hopes it would be self-sustaining with-

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in five years. A $2 per bushel tax on oystermen goes directly to planting fresh shell that also costs about $2 per bushel.

However, 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 at 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 White House honored the project with its Coastal 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 northern 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)," said Van Drew. "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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Oystermen aboard the Mary Ann sort oysters Oct. 1 in the Delaware Bay. The Delaware Bay Oyster Restoration Project has helped restore the oyster population in the bay.