OysterFest being held in Millville to benefit educational programs on bay, N.J. schooner

By THOMAS BARLAS
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The annual festival dedicated to the oyster that at one time gave Cumberland County one of the world's largest oyster industries is scheduled for Nov. 5.

The Bayshore Discovery Project's OysterFest 2011 will be held at the WheatonArts Event Center in Millville.

The event benefits the educational programs, including those on board the schooner A.J. Meerwald.

The event also is being held during what many hope is a rebuilding period for the Delaware Bay oyster industry, said David Bushek, director of Rutgers University's Askin Shellfish Laboratory in Port Norris, Commercial Township.

The oyster industry still is an enterprise in the region of about $6 million or $7 million, Bushek said.

Bushek said oystermen take between 60,000 bushels and 100,000 bushels of oysters from public oyster grounds annually. Each bushel holds about 270 oysters, he said.

Researchers continue to work to rebuild the bay's oyster beds in the hope of increasing catch quotas, he said. They're using statistics to quantify things such as oyster-bed growth and oyster-mortality rates to determine how many more oysters can be harvested each year, he said.

"We want to get to where we're harvesting not all the growth, but a portion of the growth," Bushek said.

Researchers also have controlled one of the two main parasites that devastated oyster beds over the years, he said.

The Delaware Bay Oyster Restoration Task Force also is running a $200,000 campaign aimed at spreading news about the economic and cultural aspect of the oyster. That involves the effect oyster harvesting has on communities around the Delaware Bay.

According to the Cumberland County government website on the history of the area, Port Norris was once considered the oyster capital of the world.

A railroad track was built to Bivalve in Commercial Township in 1875 and oysters were shipped in the shell by boxcar, the website says. County railroad officials said the oysters were, in the summer, covered with ice and hauled away by the trains at night to take advantage of the cooler weather.

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