Delaware Bay oystermen wrap up successful season despite early challenges

SEAFOOD.COM NEWS [The News of Cumberland County] By Philip Tomlinson - December 8, 2011 -

The Delaware Bay oyster season ended several weeks, and degrees, later than usual this year.

Despite a bleak outlook in the early fall, when a majority of the bay was closed due to an influx of bacterial contaminants and fresh water from Hurricane Irene and subsequent heavy rains, most local oyster boats managed to fill their seasonal quotas.

The extension was a relief to wholesalers and commercial watermen from Port Norris and the surrounding area.

The beds that were affected most by the closure were those located around the mouth of the Maurice River and Cohanseiy Cove and Nantuxent Cove. The unprecedented closures amounted to nearly a month of lost harvest during what is normally the peak of the fall season.

Despite a reopening of the beds and a resumption of the oyster season, the lingering effects of this year's record-setting weather are still being felt.

The oyster beds in the upper reaches of the bay are facing a difficult winter. Reduced salinity from the deluge of fresh water that entered the bay this fall has weakened the oysters in the beds of the upper bay.

David Bushek, director of the Haskin Shellfish Research Laboratory, described the threat.

"The beds in the upper bay have been looking at a lot of freshwater kill," Bushek said. "We are hoping these beds are strong enough to survive the winter."

The effects of this season's record rainfall haven't all been bad, however. One positive aspect of the fresh water influx has been a reduction in Dermo.

Dermo is the common name for a disease caused by the protozoan parasite, Perkinsus Marinas. Dermo, which is no threat to humans, is a naturally occurring condition that can prove fatal to oysters.

The massive amounts of fresh water that entered the Delaware Bay following Hurricane Irene and Tropical Storm Lee essentially caused a natural flushing effect.

According to Bushek, "The hurricanes pushed a lot of the disease out of the beds. This, along with the drop in salinity, has depressed the disease throughout much of the bay."

Overall, scientists are hoping that an increase in survivability in the down-bay beds balances the anticipated increase in mortality among the beds in the upper bay.
A final assessment of the 2011 season, including harvest information and localized mortality rates, is being completed by researchers and scientists from Rutgers and the Haskin Shellfish Research Laboratory.

The results of the survey will be presented during a three-day workshop at the Haskin Shellfisheries Laboratory office in Bivalve, Feb. 13-15.

The workshop will include shellfish experts and scientists from all latitudes along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts. Information disseminated by Rutgers scientists at this meeting will be used to recommend harvest limits for the 2012 season to the Shellfisheries Research Council.

Members of the council will use these recommendations to set regulations for the 2012 harvest at the Council meeting directly following the workshop.