Bay oyster seasons off to early start because of hurricanes

By Associated Press

The effects of Gulf Coast hurricanes reached the Chesapeake Bay as Virginia and Maryland management agencies both acted to expand their oyster harvest seasons because oyster production in the Gulf Coast was crippled by the storms.

A bushel of oysters from the Chesapeake could fetch more than $40 this winter—up from about $30 a bushel last season—because of the sharply reduced supply from Louisiana, which typically produces 40 percent of the nation’s oysters, and other Gulf Coast states.

“We have a critical need for oysters right now,” said Bill Sieling, executive director of the Chesapeake Bay Seafood Industries Association.

The Maryland Department of Natural Resources, anticipating higher demand, decided to open the power dredging oyster season two weeks early, on Oct. 18 instead of Nov. 1.

The Virginia Marine Resources Commission voted to open the season Oct. 1 for most areas and to increase the daily limit from eight to 12 bushels. Normally, the season opens in December.

Hurricane Katrina, and Rita behind her, dealt a harsh blow to an already limping industry. When Katrina flattened parts of the Gulf Coast in late August, it devastated oyster beds, boats and other harvest infrastructure east of New Orleans. Rita hit the industry west of New Orleans in September.

The shortfall has not only increased prices, but has created a threat to the survival of Virginia’s oyster shucking houses, which depend on the Gulf Coast region for about 90 percent of their stock.

Roger Mann, director of the research and advisory service at the Virginia Institute of Marine Science, said that normally, he would be arguing for conservation but that concessions were needed to keep the industry going.

“I think everyone is aware that this is not a bottomless resource,” he said.

The Bay’s oyster population is near an all-time low because of disease, overharvesting and loss of habitat, and is the subject of a recent petition to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration asking that it be considered for protection under the Endangered Species Act.

But industry officials said the early seasons won’t make a significant difference in the nation’s supply of oysters this year because the Chesapeake Bay catch is nothing close to the catches that typically come from the Gulf Coast region. Maryland, for example, turned in 72,000 bushels of oysters last year while Mississippi and Louisiana each produced millions of bushels.

Louisiana has delayed indefinitely its oyster season on public waters east of the Mississippi River, and the state of Mississippi will have no season this year, said Bradley Randall, shellfish program coordinator for the Mississippi Department of Marine Resources.

“We probably had about 90 to 95 percent mortality in our commercial area,” said Randall, adding that it would take at least two years for the industry there to reach pre-Hurricane Katrina levels.

In Florida, the oyster beds were spared much destruction from Katrina, but a persistent red tide has made oystering there impossible. The oyster season opened Sept. 1 but was closed two days later because of the red tide, a toxic algae bloom, said Mark Berrigan of the Florida Division of Aquaculture.

“It’s not very encouraging right now” for oysters from the Gulf Coast, Berrigan said. “I hope they find
some oysters up there.”

Maryland watermen said it’s too early to tell whether a longer season will boost oyster production. Until the dredgers get out into Tangier Sound, where most power dredging is done, they won’t know what the oyster beds look like, Sieling said. It’s possible the annual harvest will be about the same as last year, just harvested earlier.

“There are only so many oysters out there,” he said.

In Louisiana, state marine fisheries biologist Martin Bourgeois said he doubted a longer Chesapeake Bay season would lower oyster prices for consumers.

“No one can reasonably expect that opening it two weeks earlier is going to change much,” he said. “Prices are going to be astronomical...You’re going to have to dig a little deeper in your pockets to afford them.”

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