

Mississippi's

Oyster Industry Poised for a Comeback



In October, oyster boats began harvesting from Mississippi reefs for the first time since Hurricane Katrina.

Story and Photos Bob Ratliff

*S*hrimp boats and their tasty harvest are part of the image most people have of the Mississippi Gulf Coast, but other important seafood crops are pulled from the waters of the Gulf.

Oysters contribute to the economies of all the Gulf Coast states, and before Hurricane Katrina, the oyster industry pumped about \$100 million into the Mississippi economy each year. In fact, Mississippi and other Gulf Coast states traditionally harvest the majority of the United States' domestic oyster supply.

"The East Coast is famous for oysters, but today if you order fresh oysters in a restaurant on Maryland's Chesapeake Bay, you'll likely be eating Gulf Coast oysters because pollu-

tion and other factors have taken a toll on the industry in other areas of the nation," said David Burrage, Extension professor of marine resources at Mississippi State University's Coastal Research and Extension Center in Biloxi. "The Mississippi oyster industry was dealt a serious blow by Katrina, and there was no harvest between fall 2005 and this fall."

Only about half of the 300 or so people who normally work in the oyster harvest are participating this year, he added. Also, the curtailed harvest is expected to total about 35,000 sacks of oysters between fall 2007 and spring 2008, or about 10 percent of the annual pre-Katrina harvest. Each sack of oysters in-the-shell weighs about 85 pounds.



"Hurricane Katrina damaged about 90 to 95 percent of Mississippi's 12,000 acres of oyster beds on Aug. 29, 2005," Burrage said. "The Mississippi Department of Marine Resources, with federal funding and the help of Mississippi's oystermen, began rebuilding the oyster reefs in August 2006."

Rebuilding damaged reefs and creating new ones is done with "cultch plants." The plants consist of oyster shells or crushed concrete rubble spread over the bottom of the Gulf using high-pressure hoses. The material gives young oysters, or spats, a clean surface on which to attach and grow. After they attach, it takes them about 18 to 24 months to reach marketable size.

"It's one of our duties to see that our oyster reefs are developed and made as productive and profitable as possible," said Marine Resources shellfish coordinator Scott Gordon. "The cultch planting is one of the most essential tools we have to achieve that."

The success of the plants helped reopen the Mississippi oyster reefs to limited harvesting in the fall of 2007.

"It's really good to see all the new growth that's out there," Gordon said. "We do have harvestable oysters, but we are limiting the harvest this year to protect the young oysters."

Tradition is important in the oyster industry on the Gulf Coast, Gordon added, and it is a trade that is handed down from generation to generation.

"Most of the people on the oyster boats have been in the business for 10 or more years, and they learned from another fisherman, so it's important that the industry's infrastructure be rebuilt as soon as possible if we're going to pass the business along to another generation," he said.

The oystermen are proud of their business and are working to see that it remains a part of the Gulf Coast.

"We probably have the best oyster reefs in the world right here in the Gulf, and with proper management of the resources, the industry can come back," said Rusty Quave, who started going out on oyster boats when he was 10 and now owns a boat. He also serves as mayor of the coastal town of D'Iberville.

"Seafood has always been an important industry in our community, and we would like to see it continue," he said.

The return of oyster boats to the Mississippi Gulf in 2007 is encouraging for all aspects of the industry.

"We're really not expecting much this year, but next year the harvest should be back to a good level," said Phyllis Jenkins of Crystal Seas Oysters, a Jenkins family-owned business in Pass Christian specializing in oysters and shrimp.

"Most of the oysters we're processing this year are from Louisiana, and we're looking forward to Mississippi getting back into production," Jenkins said.



MSU Coastal Research Lab Supports Seafood Industry

A team of professionals at MSU's Coastal Research and Extension Center provides services to all parts of the state's seafood industry.

Extension professor of marine resources David Burrage, with assistance from fisheries technologist Peter Nguyen, provides educational programs on regulations, new types of equipment and other industry-related issues for commercial fishermen on the Mississippi Coast.

Other MSU Coastal Research and Extension Center personnel who work with the state's seafood industry include Ben Posadas, an economist, and Jeff Dillon, who is responsible for the day-to-day operations of the university's Seafood Processing Lab in Pascagoula.

"The Seafood Processing Lab supports Mississippi's seafood industry through research with underused shellfish and finfish species and with by-products from seafood processing," Burrage said. "The lab is also available to processors for testing new equipment or processing techniques."

Raw oysters on the half shell are a popular seafood item for many Americans, but there is a danger that raw oysters can contain the bacterium *Vibrio vulnificus* (V.v.). The bacterium can cause individuals with liver disease, diabetes or weak immune systems to become severely ill or even die. Research is under way at the seafood lab on treatments that help eliminate the danger while keeping oysters fresh.

"Oyster processors, especially small processors, will benefit from low-cost, effective ways to provide consumers a safer oyster product," Posadas said. "One of the treatments we're testing at the lab is a rapid-chill depuration system to reduce the amount of the bacterium while maintaining the quality of the oysters. It simulates what happens in nature during the winter months when the bacteria rates drop as water temperatures cool."

The lab staff also is testing state-of-the-art irradiation equipment for use in reducing bacteria levels in raw oysters.

"At the lab, we focus on ways to support the seafood industry through work with cost-effective processing systems that make seafood products more readily acceptable to consumers," Dillon said.

Above, David Burrage, left, and Jennifer Williams with quick-frozen oysters on the half shell at Crystal Seas Seafood in Pass Christian.