From the Mouth of the Bay

As I write this, the reports on the disaster in the Gulf of Mexico continue to worsen, with little hope of a solution. Hopes are tied to the slim chance that a dome can be lowered over the spewing well head some 5,000 feet below the surface to capture the gushing oil.

Should this fail, the flow of oil could continue for months. I fear the worst as my prayers go out to everyone who tries to make a living off the water in the Gulf, and to all those fighting to limit the damage. Promises of insurance payments won’t make up for the losses of entire businesses built on decades of hard work. The experience of the Exxon Valdez spill has taught us that damage payments can be tied up in the courts for decades, while the oil may remain in the ecosystem for even longer.

Further up the East Coast the picture is brighter, as waters are warming and seed are starting to put on some new shell. We have been very busy working on several fronts to improve things for growers. The action by the FDA to regulate the sale of raw Gulf oysters has been delayed by a year while producers are given a chance to prove that investments in refrigeration can bring illness under control.

Nevertheless, I fear these investments may all be for naught since shellfish beds are being closed due to oil contamination even as I write. Gulf producers have made great strides toward their goal of a 60-percent reduction in illness.

Even though they remain a few percent short of the target, they are committed to meeting this goal by whatever means necessary.

In response to heavy press coverage, the FDA issued a clarification, stating that they do not intend to mandate Post Harvest Processing for control of *Vibrio parahaemolyticus*. This is a relief, but it is hard to believe that we are not still under their microscope after all we have learned. We must continue to improve our handling of shellfish to cut down on illnesses proactively, both for our markets and to avoid costly closures and new regulations. I have been organizing workshops and developing informational brochures for growers, harvesters and dealers up and down the coast to emphasize the need for temperature control from farm to fork. As professionals with huge investments in our farms, we need to ensure that those who may be careless get the message that we all suffer when anyone gets sick.

Sen. Jack Reed, D-RI, has put in a $3-million appropriation request to fund a USDA Agricultural Research Service Shellfish Breeding Center that would bring resources to expand selective breeding efforts at six East Coast universities. We are forming an Industry – Technical Advisory Group to decide on the priorities and operations of the Center. Please contact me if you would like to get involved.

— Bob Rheault
*Executive Director*
Maine Marketing Workshop
by Dana Morse
Maine Sea Grant

Marketing of cultured shellfish was the topic of the day at a workshop held in Portland, ME on April 8. Producers, two industry associations, specialists in cooperatives and marketing, seafood dealers, scientists, a top-shelf chef, gear suppliers and members of the media were all on hand for a wide-ranging conversation that touched on everything from market-based production on the farm, to the benefits of strong relationships with restaurateurs and chefs.

The workshop was one of a series sponsored by the Northeast Regional Aquaculture Center, through the Regional Extension Project, and was coordinated by Maine Sea Grant / University of Maine Cooperative Extension. Partners in organizing, planning and funding the event included the Maine Aquaculture Innovation Center, Maine Aquaculture Association, East Coast Shellfish Growers Association, University of Connecticut and Salem State College.

The keynote speaker was Skip Bennett, founder and owner of Island Creek Oysters in Duxbury, MA. Island Creek has become a well recognized producer of quality oysters throughout the country and internationally, and Skip made it clear that quality product and good connections with everybody in the distribution chain – right down to the customer – play a big role in their success.

“When I started delivering oysters to the chefs right in the kitchen,” he said, “that’s when I realized that they really like knowing all about the food they serve, and what I do as a farmer.” That experience stuck with him, and he uses it to guide his business so that his wholesalers, truckers and employees can be responsive to the needs of the market.

Keeping in touch with your markets and having a marketing plan to drive your production was one of the points followed up by Sebastian Belle of the Maine Aquaculture Association.

Marketing Tip

Nice, clean, attractive packaging is a great way to help build your brand. It’s also another place to tell your customers about how your product sets you apart from the competition.

“Deliver what you market, and market what you deliver,” said Belle, who noted that growers should always keep detailed data on their marketing activities and costs so that planned work can be judged against reality, and adjusted effectively.

He also covered the traditional four points of marketing: Product, Price, Packaging and Place. Citing examples of each point, Belle stressed the importance of getting producers thinking about how their businesses are positioned, and to look for areas needing improvement.

Cooperatives for production, purchasing and marketing were covered by Bill Brockhouse, an agriculture specialist with the USDA in Washington, DC. Bill went step-by-step through the process of cooperative development, providing a number of materials that growers can use to figure out if a cooperative is right for them. Given that many shellfish producers are smaller operations, one of the advantages of the co-op approach was that a co-op manager can play the role of marketer for the whole group, whereas producers may have a hard time allocating time and financial resources to the important job of marketing.

“Continued on the next page...
The topics of branding and certifications were covered by Bob Rheault of the East Coast Shellfish Grower’s Association, who said it all starts with quality, quality, and quality. Development of your brand in the mind of the customer is a product of hard work and attention to detail, and is a fragile thing. When talking with people in your distribution chain, listen more than you talk, and be open to changing your practices if warranted.

Rheault emphasized the mindset of *Never stop marketing*: use your box, your shirt, your hat, everything to convey a consistent message. On certifications, he thinks the jury is still out on the market advantage of eco-certifications, but the issue bears watching. For now, the process is driven by larger wholesalers rather than by consumers.

The afternoon was devoted to two panel presentations. In the first, Tollef Olson (mussel and seaweed grower, Casco Bay, ME), Terry Callery (marketing consultant, Waldoboro, ME) and Jeff Payson (Northeast Transport, Waldoboro, ME) were focused on reaching customers, literally and figuratively, and showed that there’s more than one way to skin the cat – or shellfish.

Tollef began by recognizing that farming shellfish is like farming and fishing everywhere: it’s not just a job, it’s a way of life. He also emphasized the value of getting in front of customers, through personal contact at events, persistence with distributors and the use of social media, while Terry’s message was that growers should focus on growing the best product possible rather than on spending their time marketing. He added that by working with marketing specialists, larger dealers and distributors, and by using some available information on distribution routes, the jobs of marketing and sales could be taken care of, without taking the farmer off the farm.

Jeff reinforced the value of working closely with a transport company, citing several cities his company can access with good regularity. With full loads, delivery can cost as little as 10 cents per pound. This led to the possibilities of growers working together, and marketing to buyers at a distance, to reduce local competition. Jeff echoed several other speakers who talked about the value of good packaging in ensuring that your product looks good and arrives with the best quality possible – sagging, drab, leaky boxes on a pallet are two strikes right off the bat.

The last two speakers – Peter Ramsden (CEO, Foley Fish, Boston, MA) and Jeremy Sewall (Owner and Executive Chef, Lineage and Eastern Standard restaurants, MA) – followed the travel of the product through a wholesaler, and finally to the chef’s plate. Once again, good lines of communication and strong relationships were watchwords, as was quality. As Peter noted, speaking about relationships and family-run operations like Foley Fish, “We’re going to be in the business, and we hope you’ll be in the business. We want our grandkids to be buying shellfish from your grandkids.”

From the standpoint of a distributor, Peter looks for a few key things in his shellfish vendors: a passion for what they do, willingness to be a good communicator, ability to run their operations as real businesses, and a desire to always improve the product. And to close things up, Jeremy returned the group back to where we began, which was that he loves to hear about the food: how it’s grown, where it came from, who grew it, and all those details that help to create a good story behind the food.

A full transcript is in progress for the event, and a companion CD is being developed for distribution through NRAC, extension agents, ECSGA, MAA and others. The CD will contain the transcript, presentations, and a list of printed and on-line resources to help producers become effective marketers.

For more information about the workshop contact Dana Morse, Maine Sea Grant / University of Maine Cooperative Extension, (207) 563-3146 x 205, or by email: dana.morse@maine.edu.
The 2010 International Boston Seafood Show took place on March 14-16 at the Boston Conference and Exhibition Center. The general consensus among exhibitors was that attendance was up from 2009, but not at the same levels seen prior to the economic downturn. In my opinion, the show was the perfect size. There were plenty of buyers present without so many that it was overwhelming. With the smaller show size, more buyers seemed willing to spend more time in each booth.

Most conversations revolved around the economy and when we might see a strong increase in seafood sales. For the retail side, most stores saw their sales remain steady throughout the recession. However, the restaurant and food service sides saw great declines in seafood sales, as fewer people are eating out.

On the final day of the show, William “Chopper” Young defended his title as the fastest oyster shucker in the East. The nine contestants competed in a three-round contest shucking Atlantic, Pacific, and Gulf Coast oysters. Second place went to Deborah Pratt of Urbanna, VA, and third place went to Gordon Weldon from Union Trust Steakhouse in Philadelphia, PA.

The dates for the 2011 Boston Seafood show are Sunday, March 20 – Tuesday, March 22. For those of you who have never attended, it is a great opportunity to market your product and network within the seafood industry.

Oil Spill Lessons Learned

by Mimi Jung, KING 5 News

SEATTLE - When 1,500 gallons of oil spilled into Puget Sound in October 2004, shellfish growers were slow to respond. That incident prompted the industry to begin HAZWOPER training, which stands for Hazardous Waste Operations Emergency Response.

“Number one, immediate response is critical. Any lag time in getting resources out there to get that spill contained and cleaned up is going to make things a lot worse,” said Russ Walker of Taylor Shellfish Farms.

Shellfish growers also learned the importance of taking inventory before disaster strikes.

“You want to have records, maps of where your product is, so you know where it is at the time of the spill,” said Andy Suhbier, marine biologist with Pacific Shellfish Institute.

Suhbier recently talked with shellfish growers in the Gulf Coast about how they should prepare for emergency response.

“I recommended that they go out and take some samples before the oil actually gets to the beaches, so they have a baseline of what the oysters look like out there,” said Suhbier.
Performance of Triploid Oysters on Commercial Shellfish Farms

by Bill Walton, Auburn University Shellfish Lab; and Diane Murphy, Cape Cod Cooperative Extension & Woods Hole Sea Grant

Although triploidy has been widely implemented on a commercial scale by producers of the Pacific oyster, Crassostrea gigas, in a number of regions around the world commercial producers of the Eastern oyster, C. virginica, have been slower to adopt this method. In response to increasing interest in triploid oysters by Massachusetts shellfish farmers, we are conducting a two-year study, funded by the Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources.

To evaluate the potential performance of naturally-induced triploid C. virginica (which are approved for human consumption, while chemically-induced triploids are not) in the southern New England region, we began a comparative field test of triploid and diploid oysters at 12 shellfish farms along the Massachusetts coast. In both 2008 and 2009, participating shellfish farmers took summer delivery of paired diploid and triploid seed, spawned and reared at ARC in Dennis, MA. Seed were raised in standard commercial oyster plastic mesh bags and positioned in vinyl-coated wire racks placed on-bottom. In the first year oysters were stocked at 500/bag, and in the second year at 150/bag. Seed and gear were maintained by the participating shellfish farmers throughout the study.

On average, triploids and diploids survived equally well. For all growth and condition results, there was a very strong effect of site. However, the effect of ploidy depended heavily on where the oysters were being raised. In the first year of grow-out, there was not a clear difference between the triploids and diploids, though there was a small subset of sites where the triploid seed were larger than the paired diploid seed.

In the second year of grow-out of the 2008 crop, at a subset of sites the average daily changes in the various shell dimensions, dry shell weight, and tissue dry weight were significantly larger for triploids compared to the paired diploids. Analyses indicated that triploids had heavier shells and more meat (per mm of shell height) than paired diploids, again at a subset of sites.

When we examined condition index over the growing season, we observed a trend for triploids to equal or exceed the condition of paired diploids. The only measure where diploids appeared to outperform paired triploids was in terms of the ‘fan’ shape of the oyster (shell length/shell height, where a higher number indicates a broader oyster). At a subset of sites, diploids had significantly higher ratios compared to paired diploids (though even the lowest ratios observed appeared to be acceptable to the market).

While the study will not conclude until the end of this growing season, it appears that triploid oysters have the potential for large advantages in terms of growth and condition.

However, due to the large site-to-site variability, it is recommended that a side-by-side trial be run before making any large-scale purchases.

Despite many apparent advantages, triploid oysters face several challenges to wide acceptance. Potential public perception of triploid oysters as “unnatural,” and confusion with non-native species suggests that additional public education is necessary. Another issue of concern is that these oysters are non-reproductive and contribute nothing to wild populations – countering the argument that shellfish aquaculture enhances wild stocks.

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North Carolina Shellfish Expo
by Jay Styron
President, NC Shellfish Growers Association
Owner, Carolina Mariculture Co.

On April 12 the North Carolina Shellfish Growers Association held its sixth annual NC Shellfish Expo in Morehead City, NC. By all accounts the Expo was well received and highlighted some of the best shellfish from local waterways.

Based on an “Iron Chef” format, the program pitted local restaurant chefs against students from Carteret County Community College’s culinary program. The chefs were provided with oysters and clams and asked to present the judges with hors d’oeuvres, an appetizer, and a main course. Each of the dishes had to incorporate shellfish in the recipe.

The judges – a panel of local celebrities, businessmen and restaurateurs – tasted all of the offerings and selected the winning plate from within each category. The entire event was planned by the Carteret County Community College Culinary Arts Program and provided the students with practical experience in event planning and banquet preparation.

The Expo showcased North Carolina clams and oysters while also allowing local chefs, shellfish growers and seafood distributors to learn more about local seafood. Local wineries were also invited to bring their best wines to pair with the shellfish. As you can see, the goal of this event was to showcase local.

While clams have been farmed in North Carolina for years, historically the oyster fishery has been based on wild caught, bushel market oysters. The NC Shellfish Expo gave shellfish growers the opportunity to highlight their farm-raised shellfish.

Hopefully, events such as the NC Shellfish Expo will encourage restaurants, seafood markets and distributors to specifically request local shellfish, which in turn will give growers the economic incentive to produce this product. We have some hurdles within the state to overcome, but I feel we could rival Virginia, Maryland and other Northeast states in total output.

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A study by American and Italian chemists presented at the annual meeting of the American Chemical Society in San Diego on March 16 reports that the ancient claim that oysters, clams and mussels are aphrodisiacs may be true.

“The supposition for centuries was that oysters, clams and mussels have been thought to have aphrodisiac properties,” said researcher George Fisher, a professor of chemistry from Barry University, in Miami Shores, FL. “And they were eaten raw for that purpose.”

Until recently, there was no scientific basis for that belief, Fisher added. But what he and his colleagues discovered is that mussels, clams and oysters contain compounds that have been shown to be effective in releasing sexual hormones such as testosterone and estrogen. These compounds are D-aspartic acid and NMDA (N-methyl-D-aspartate).

“We found there might be a scientific basis for the aphrodisiac properties of these mollusks,” Fisher said.

Not so fast, says food myth expert Dr. Robert H. Shmerling, an associate professor of medicine from Harvard Medical School. “The findings are certainly interesting, but we still have a ways to go before saying that there is scientific evidence that clams, oysters and scallops boost libido,” he said.

Shmerling asks this: When D-aspartic acid and NMDA are digested, do they still lead to sex hormone release? And do they release enough estrogen or testosterone to matter?

“Testosterone is thought to play a more major role in libido in men and women than estrogen alone; in fact, estrogen release could reduce libido in women. And while it’s hard to predict what, if anything, mollusk-induced estrogen release would do in men, it probably would not increase sex drive,” Shmerling said.

In addition, Shmerling wonders if animal studies linking D-aspartic acid and NMDA to the release of sex hormones is even relevant to humans.

“This is a good example of the headlines getting well ahead of the science,” Shmerling said. “It will take much more compelling evidence – with human subjects – to prove a link between seafood and libido.”

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**Are Shellfish Really Aphrodisiacs?**

*Adapted from a story by Steven Reinberg originally published in HealthDay www.sexualhealth.e-healthsource.com/?p=news1&id=524559*

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**This is Your Newsletter**

We are always looking for new content for the newsletter, so if there’s a topic that you’d like to learn more about, let us know and we’ll try to find someone who knows about it or do some investigative reporting ourselves.

Or if you have experience in some area that other growers would find interesting, please feel free to submit a short piece.

Either way, we’re looking for your input, so please do your part! Thanks!

— Kathy Rhodes, newsletter editor

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A Time for the ECSGA to Be Heard

There are not many individuals or groups in the United States who know as much about shellfish and all that pertains to it than the East Coast Shellfish Growers Association. Our members come from every state from Maine to Florida. Our members grow oysters and clams using many different methodologies. Some of our members are small individual operators and some are the largest companies in the entire industry.

No matter how you view the shellfish industry, we have members in every Atlantic Coast state and they are rooted in the very fabric of life that is shellfish aquaculture. I would not be out of line to say that our members are some of the most knowledgeable people that exist when it comes to shellfish and shellfish aquaculture. If this statement about the knowledge of our members is true then why are we not one of the quoted authorities in the press on shellfish? The ECSGA should be framing the debate, not the environmentalists or the national media. The ECSGA will not sit idly on the sidelines anymore as others talk about shellfish in the press, quite often not knowing the facts.

As we enter an uneasy time for many of our Gulf colleagues with the Gulf oil spill and the potential for new FDA restrictions on shellfish, let’s work together to be at the forefront of this discussion. We will be regularly putting out press releases on “How we see it” as it pertains to the national discussion on fish and shellfish. Help us as we move forward. As we elevate the profile of the ECSGA and the positive discussion of shellfish we will be helping ourselves.

Keep it fresh.

— Tom Kehoe
President-East Coast Shellfish Growers Association
K & B Seafood, Inc.

Join Our LISTSERV

If you haven’t joined the ECSGA e-mail LISTSERV yet you are missing out on lots of timely news and information. It’s free and easy to join from our website www.ECSGA.org.

The volume of posts is not overwhelming and the list is our primary conduit for delivering important news, grant information and action alerts to our members.

Upcoming Events 2010


8th International Conference on Recirculating Aquaculture, Aug. 20-22, in Roanoke, VA. www.recircaqua.com/icra.html

6th International Symposium on Aquatic Animal Health, Sept. 5-9, in Tampa, FL. www.epi.ufl.edu/?q=aquaticpath/isaa6

Clam School, sponsored by University of Florida, Sept. 15-16, in Cedar Key, FL. Contact Victor Garrido: vmga@ufl.edu

Vibrios in the Environment 2010, Nov. 7-12, in Biloxi, MS. www.joss.ucar.edu/vibrios_2010

International Conference on Shellfish Restoration, Nov. 17-20, in Charleston, SC. www.scseagrant.org/content/?cid=297


Links and more information are available on the Events page of the ECSGA website:

www.ECSGA.org

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Perspective on the Oil Spill

The oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico is an ecological and human disaster that will surely affect not only the fragile habitats where shrimp and oysters are harvested, but also the very core of the community that brings these iconic delicacies from the waters of the Gulf to the tables of America.

We don’t want to minimize the pain and suffering being endured by those who make their living in the Gulf, but it is important not to allow the negative images damage the rest of the seafood economy. If you are speaking to the press remember to emphasize that the seafood in the markets continues to be safe and healthy.

Regular monitoring and precautionary closures ensure that consumers continue to have access to seafood of only the highest level of quality and safety. Oyster beds east of the Mississippi were closed days before oil was evident in any coastal waters with more closures expected well before any contamination is detected.

Hysterical exaggerations on the impact to the nation’s seafood supply are counterproductive and misleading. Only 2 percent of the seafood (and about 67 percent of U.S. oysters) consumed by Americans is harvested from the Gulf. About 83 percent of the seafood consumed in this country comes from overseas.

As with red tides, the coherent message of our industry must be clear: the seafood in the marketplace is safe and wholesome. We have extensive monitoring and regulatory systems in place to ensure that no tainted product enters the marketplace.
Mail Membership form and dues to:
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Annual Dues Schedule

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