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First a Hatchery, Now Hope for Oysters

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Published: June 27, 1999

THE state is establishing a shellfish hatchery in the Noank section of Groton in an attempt to save Connecticut's indigenous stocks of oysters and an economically significant industry.

Two parasites, harmful to oysters but not to humans, have virtually destroyed Chesapeake Bay's oyster industry and have infected Connecticut's most productive oyster grounds, reducing the catch and harming the state's \$50 million industry. The state hopes the hatchery can produce oysters resistant to the parasites



"The initial focus of the hatchery will be on the production of oyster seed that are disease resistant," said John H. Volk, director of the State Department of Agriculture's Bureau of Aquaculture. "The oyster seed will be made available to municipal shellfish commissions and small oyster industries that have been hard hit by the devastation of the MSX and Dermo oyster parasites."

The hatchery will breed and grow oysters that have demonstrated resistance to the two parasites and that have evolved to thrive in the particular conditions of the state's different estuaries and inshore waters that produce natural growths of oysters, Mr. Volk said.

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Dermo is caused by a single-cell protozoan called Perkinsus marinus and is the slower acting of the two, taking up to three years to kill an infected oyster. Its name was derived from a fungus previously thought to be the cause of the oyster disease. MSX (for multinucleated sphere X), caused by the protozoan Haplosporidium nelsoni, kills within three to six weeks. Because oysters take three to five years to reach marketable size, either parasite can wipe out the market.

"A useful strain of oysters must not only be resistant, but locally adaptable," said James Markow, an owner of Aeros Cultured Oyster Company. The company operates a shellfish hatchery in Shirley, N.Y., and has worked with the Groton Shellfish Commission for the past seven years on a variety of oyster propagation projects.

"Something that might work in one place, all year might not work there the next year," Mr. Markow said. "With aquaculture you've got to always adjust."

MSX was first detected in Long Island Sound in 1985. Production fell from over 243,000 bushels in 1984 to 69,721 bushels in 1987, says Dr. Inke Sunila, a state shellfish pathologist.

In 1992, MSX returned to Long Island Sound. In that year, about 900,000 bushels of oysters were harvested in Connecticut waters with a wholesale value of about \$42 million. By 1994 only about 600,000 bushels of oysters were harvested in state waters with a wholesale value of about \$32 million.

In 1996 Dermo spread to Long Island Sound, but no known mortality associated with Dermo has occurred in Long Island Sound, Dr. Sunila said.

At the state hatchery, oysters will be grown from microscopic swimming larvae to the size of a pin head by feeding them a special blend of marine algae, said Karen Rivara, president and an owner of Aero. They are then moved to an oyster nursery where they are placed in nutrient-rich water pumped from the adjacent estuary.

The juvenile oysters are held in mesh-bottomed containers that protect them and provide a constant flow of water. When large enough, the oysters are placed in cages, which resemble lobster pots, and placed in the waters of Fishers Island Sound, where they will continue to grow until ready for market.

Aero will contribute \$65,000 in nursery and other equipment and also the use of the George Billo, a 1905 oyster harvest boat. Under its contract with the Groton Shellfish Commission, Aero will then have access to about half the seed oysters that the hatchery produces in its first year (about 2 1/2 million seeds).

The plan for the hatchery's first year of aquaculture calls for the production of five million seed oysters. About 1 1/2 million of the oyster seeds will be turned over to the Groton Shellfish Commission, which conceived and is implementing the plan for the hatchery. The shellfish commission will run the hatchery in cooperation with the aquaculture division and private businesses and it will use the oyster seeds for recreational oyster programs. One million

seeds will be sold to other commercial oyster companies.

The hatchery plan calls for the formation of new partnerships with other private shellfish businesses, other municipal shellfish commissions and marine educational and vocational agencies, said the Groton Shellfish Commissioner Neil Brown. The plan calls for the inclusion of businesses, educational programs, and shellfish commissions that can benefit from the association with the hatchery and can, in turn, benefit the hatchery, Mr. Brown said.

"Finding a solution to Dermo and MSX will not be a one-shot deal," said Mr. Markow. "These parasites will come back in slightly different form. It will not be as much of a problem in Long Island Sound as it is in the Chesapeake, because Long Island Sound has great flushing and colder water.

"It takes two to three years to grow an oyster to market size the old-fashioned way," Mr. Markow added. "Along comes a disease that wipes you out just as you're ready to harvest. With a hatchery/nursery we figure we can get them out in one and a half years. The faster you grow out, not only is it faster to market, but you're cutting your exposure to risk."

The long-term mission of the hatchery will be to assist the state's existing aquaculture businesses and help incubate new aquaculture businesses just as the state Agricultural Experiment Station assists and incubates Connecticut agricultural businesses, Mr. Volk said.

"An important mission of the hatchery will be education and training," said Stephen Jones, a maritime writer and Groton Shellfish Commissioner.

"Students from the Regional Vocational Aquaculture School in Bridgeport, the Sound School in New Haven, and Project Oceanology will work in all parts of the hatchery operation," said Mr. Jones, a professor at UConn and the hatchery's education coordinator.

"The intent of the education and training program will be to give these young people the experience and ability to establish new aquaculture businesses or to find employment in existing aquaculture businesses."

After the hatchery fulfills its first mission of producing stocks of MSX and Dermo resistant oysters, it will be used for the cultivation of other shellfish stocks such as scallops, Mr. Volk said.

In the 19th century, scallops were harvested by recreational and commercial shell fishermen off Stonington, Clinton Harbor, and in the Niantic River. Scallops became scarce and have just been re-introduced in Clinton Harbor. Although there is limited recreational scalloping in the Niantic River, commercial scalloping no longer exists in Connecticut.

The idea of the hatchery began when the Groton Shellfish Commissioner, Roger Sherman, and the Commission chairman, Ronald Chappell, learned that the two-storied, brick building near the mouth of the Mystic River was about to be sold. The building had been used by UConn as a research laboratory focused on lobsters and blue fish from 1955 until 1998, when a new complex was built for the university's maritime expansion program at Avery Point Campus.

The brick building had been built as an engine factory at the turn of the century when Noank was still a fishing and ship-building village. Later, it housed a velvet-making mill. Following the hurricane of 1938, it replaced the state lobster hatchery, which had been situated about half a mile down the Mystic River and had been washed away by the storm, Mr. Jones said.

The thing that is unusual about the Groton Shellfish Commission, said Mr. Volk, is the institutional memory of its members. Many of the shellfish commissioners are watermen who are retired from private industry. They have the experience of their professions as well as the continuity of experience from their many years as shellfish commissioners, he said.

UConn initially wanted \$500,000 to transfer ownership of the property to the state aquaculture division. But State Representative Lenny Winkler, a Republican of Groton, worked with Thomas Q. Callahan, an associate vice president at UConn, and the State Department of Agriculture Commissioner Shirley C. Ferris, who is also a UConn trustee, to agree to transfer the property to the state aquaculture division for free. UConn's compensation has yet to be determined, Mr. Winkler said.

"Right now all hatchery shellfish stocks are coming from out-of-state," Mr. Winkler said. "There's no need for this. There was no need to sell the property and there was no need for one state agency to pay another state agency to do something so beneficial."

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