



DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
INFORMATION SERVICE

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

For Immediate Release

**SEA FARMERS PRODUCE
HUGE CROP OF OYSTERS**

Oystermen from Cape Cod to the mouth of the Rio Grande, and from British Columbia to San Diego harbor, are busy these days getting their equipment in shape for tonging and dredging oysters from their ocean beds, and preparing them for shipment throughout the nation for the "official opening" of the new season on September 1.

Reports received by the Fish and Wildlife Service, United States Department of the Interior, indicate that the coming season will produce an excellent and abundant crop of fat and succulent oysters for consumption by lovers of this seafood delicacy during the coming "R" months. In 1939, the latest year for which complete data are available, the oyster crop in the United States amounted to 93,006,000 pounds, or 46,503 tons, worth \$8,190,000 to the oyster farmer.

The American oyster industry, says the Service, is based principally on three species—the Atlantic oyster, the Olympia oyster of the Pacific Coast, and the Japanese oyster grown on the Pacific Coast from seed imported

from Japan. This industry, which dates back to the early days of the Colonists, today forms this country's third most valuable fishery in point of income to the fisherman, and the first from the standpoint of employment in the fisheries, with about 60,000 persons engaged in its various branches.

Oysters were so abundant when the first settlers on the Atlantic Coast of America began to take them from the natural beds that the Colonists thought the supply was inexhaustible. Today there are no oysters north of Cape Cod, because of excessive harvesting which reduced them faster than they could reproduce.

Called Oyster Farmers

With the depletion of natural oyster beds, the planting of artificial oyster beds--or oyster culture--came into practice, through the initiative of the oystermen themselves. Since the culture of oysters much resembles the sowing, cultivating, and harvesting of a cereal such as wheat, oyster culturists have come to be known as oyster farmers, and just as land farmers have for centuries tilled the soil, so do these "farmers of the sea" harvest their crops from the waters.

Oyster farming is carried on by individuals who may cultivate a few acres of bottom, by corporations which operate thousands of acres of water area, and by State governments which conduct operations on the public grounds. The private farms may be owned outright in some States much like any other piece of real estate, or they may be leased from the State. The basis for modern progressive oyster culture was laid in the enactment of legislation based on the theory that an oysterman must have the same control of his under-water lands that a farmer has of upland soil.

There are three classes of oyster grounds—seed grounds, growing grounds, and maturing grounds--each with special adaptations to its particular use. Comparable differences occur in agriculture, one type of soil being well adapted to one crop and another to some other crop.

Oyster Raising Described

In preparing for a set of young oysters, the oyster farmer cleans the bottom by dredging up the loose debris of old shells, and enemies of the oysters such as starfishes and drills. In early summer, just before the adult oysters begin to spawn, clean shells from the shucking houses are scattered over the bottoms at the rate of about 500 to 1,000 bushels an acre. Unless there are stocks of adult spawners nearby, adult oysters are scattered over the beds on top of the shells.

A single adult female of the native Eastern oyster may discharge between 100 and 500 million eggs during the spawning season. The fertilized eggs develop into a resemblance of the adult oyster as a free swimming animal, and after about 14 days these "spat" settle down and attach themselves to the "clutch"—or clean shells. If the shells are well covered with spat, the water farmer has a good "set." If the seed grounds are reasonably safe from winter storms and ice, the young seed oysters may remain on the same grounds for a year or more, otherwise in the fall they will be dredged up and moved to a safer home.

The yearling seed oysters are moved to growing grounds, being planted at the rate of about 300 to 500 bushels to the acre, depending on the richness of the set and the character of the grounds. A year later, the growing oysters are thinned out, about half being moved to other growing grounds to prevent crowding and reduce mortality. This process is repeated

so that at the age of 4 years, the oysters may have been transplanted 2 or 3 times. Only a small fraction of 1 percent of the original spat ever grows to maturity.

Reaching market size at the age of 4 to 6 years for northern oysters, the adult oysters are removed to maturing grounds, usually in water of 2 to 3 fathoms, where there is an abundance of food so that they will fatten up for market. In southern waters the oysters reach a market size much sooner, some in as short a time as 18 months to 2 years.