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9-14-45*



DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

INFORMATION SERVICE

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

For Release TO PM's OF FRIDAY, AUGUST 31, 1945

The traditional season of the oyster opens Saturday, but the hosannas of the lovers of the succulent bivalve will probably be tempered by the knowledge that no more will be available this season than last--when there weren't quite enough to go 'round.

"There is no information to show that the supply of marketable oysters in various areas will be greater this year than it was last year," Dr. Paul S. Galtsoff in charge of the shellfishery investigations of the Interior Department's Fish and Wildlife Service today reported to Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes.

The supply of oysters in Maryland waters, chief source of the mollusk, will remain at the same level as during the past year, Dr. Galtsoff reported, but there may be certain decreases in marketable oysters in Virginia due to the increased pollution of the Hampton Roads area.

"It is expected that the intensity of pollution will diminish," he said, "but beneficial results are not to be expected immediately. Two or more years may be needed for restoration of marketing grounds."

In the Long Island Sound area--a famous center of production--matters are brighter oysterwise. Dr. V. L. Loosanoff, in charge of the shellfishery laboratory at Milford, Conn., reports that the oysters which will be marketed this year are those which set in the summers of 1940 and 1941. On both occasions the set of young oysters was good and the industry has managed to grow a large portion of those sets to marketable size.

Lack of labor during the last two or three years seriously interfered with operations of a majority of the large oyster companies, Dr. Loosanoff said. Many boats could not be manned and, therefore, some oyster beds could not be attended and cleaned as efficiently as in peace time when labor is available. Lack of labor also affected the magnitude of pest control operations, chiefly combatting starfish, which in the waters of Long Island Sound are the most important enemies of young oysters.

Fortunately, Dr. Loosanoff said, during the past two summers the starfish set was extremely light and no increase in the starfish population occurred. Nevertheless, enough old starfish remain to seriously endanger oyster beds in certain sections of the sound.

Prospects for a good oyster crop in the Gulf Coast area are "not too encouraging," according to Dr. A. E. Hopkins, who is in charge of the Fish and Wildlife Service laboratory at Pensacola, Fla.

Along the Gulf Coast the most important oyster producing areas are Apalachicola Bay, Mobile Bay, Mississippi Sound, the Louisiana marshes, and the waters of Louisiana west of the Mississippi delta. In Apalachicola Bay the prospects appear to be quite poor, Dr. Hopkins declared. The oyster grounds there have never recovered to any great extent from the severe mortality of 1934 and 1935. "While the quality of the production should be fairly good," he said, "the quantity will probably be not much greater than last year, which was far below normal."

A subnormal production is to be expected in Mobile Bay and adjacent waters because of the very severe mortality of last spring caused by freshet conditions.

"Mississippi Sound," Dr. Hopkins forecast, "will not produce a single oyster, except perhaps in the immediate vicinity of Biloxi. The destruction of oysters in the sound from Biloxi westward, which was caused by the opening of the Bonnet Carre spillway in March, was complete."

The value of oysters to be produced this season in Louisiana as a whole, however, Dr. Hopkins estimated at seventy-five to ninety per cent of the value of last season's production.

"It is likely," he said, "that the very progressive program of oyster bed rehabilitation in Texas will be immediately reflected in greater production. New programs aimed toward replenishment of the beds have been put into operation by Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama and another year should show a definite improvement."

While the outlook for this year's crop of oysters shows no improvement, the Fish and Wildlife experts offered hope for the future in other sections as well. An unusually good setting of oysters occurred in Maryland waters this year, forecasting a good crop for 1948 when these mollusks will have become large enough to serve as the chief ingredients of stews, oyster stuffing, and oysters Rockefeller.

In Long Island Sound as well the future is brighter. A good setting of oysters took place there between August 2 and 6. Because of their more northern location these will not reach market until 1949 and 1950.

"A very encouraging fact," Dr. Galtsoff added, "is that so far no setting of starfish has been observed in Long Island Sound. As a result the damages to oysters during the coming year will be less than in previous years."

Since no oyster setting takes place in Rhode Island waters and oyster farms there get young from New York and Connecticut waters, this year's setting of oysters in Long Island Sound will have a beneficial effect on Rhode Island oyster farming.

The oyster industry in Massachusetts is now almost non-existent since the hurricane of 1944 greatly damaged the oyster-producing bottoms in Buzzard's Bay and along the shore of the cape.

Oysters spawn during the summer as the temperature of the water increases. For several days the larvae are free-swimming; however, they soon sink to the bottom and seek to cement themselves to a convenient rock or shell. This process is known as setting.

Almost all the young oysters born this season along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts are males. Later in life most of them will varigate their existence by turning into females.

Most of the oysters which will be served in restaurants and homes this season will be four or five years old although some of them will probably be only three if prices continue high. While a few restaurants will begin offering oysters to their customers immediately, now that the traditional season is open, large quantities of oysters do not reach the market usually until middle October with the peak of the business during the November and December holiday periods.

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