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RESEARCH SHOWS HOW TO REVITALIZE AMERICA'S NATURAL SPONGE RESOURCE

The American natural sponge resource can be placed on a high sustained-yield basis if proper management and harvesting practices are put into effect, Assistant Secretary of the Interior Ross Leffler said today.

Mr. Leffler's statement was based upon a study just completed by the University of Miami Marine Laboratory under contract to the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, which shows that the high sustained-yield goal can be reached--

If harvesting is restricted to sponges not less than six inches in diameter, and,

If a suggested program of transplanting mature sponges during the spawning period is conducted, and,

If certain other changes in management and harvesting techniques, are inaugurated.

The report shows that natural sponge production in the sponge areas off the Gulf Coast of Florida has never regained or even approached its proportions prior to the disease outbreak in 1938. At the time that the natural sponge resource was struggling with the effects of that scourge, the manufacture of synthetic sponges went on apace. With the outbreak passed, the problem facing the natural sponge industry became one of not only revitalizing the sponge beds of Florida's offshore waters but also producing sponges at prices which are competitive with synthetic sponges.

The report further declares that because the natural sponge which is really an animal skeleton, has certain qualities which have not yet been built into the synthetic competitor, any effort which would increase production and insure a steady supply would be welcomed by those who use sponges. In the days when the

natural article had the field to itself, one-fourth of the output went to homes and to amateur users, one-fourth went to the pottery industry, and half went to professional painters, decorators, and cleaners.

The report says that good management practice usually dictates that no desirable species be harvested until it has had a chance to reproduce and sustain the yield. A commercial sponge less than six inches in diameter is immature, has had no opportunity to reproduce and therefore should not be taken.

Between 15 percent and 25 percent of the sponges currently harvested are less than six inches in diameter, and for a year or two the harvest would be down that much in volume. However, since these smaller sponges bring a lower price the money decrease would be only five percent to 10 percent. Increased yield after the first year or two would more than make up for this loss, the study indicates. It further shows that there is possibility of a slight increase in the supply on the sponge beds and that this increase in over-all supply would offset some of the loss incurred by not harvesting the smaller sponges.

According to the research the sponging area could be practically doubled in 10 years under a proper management program. The wool sponge, which constitutes about 90 percent of the commercial harvest will reach the six-inch size in about three and a half years.

The natural sponge from American sources became commercially important about 1849. Between 1917 and 1938 production of the wool sponge averaged about 350,000 pounds a year, with a peak production of 468,000 pounds in 1936. Production dropped steadily until 1951 when it reached 11,000 pounds. At present it is about 30,000 pounds.

While the wool sponge is by far most important commercially, other sponges which have market value are the yellow, Anclote yellow, Key Grass, Gulf Grass, Finger and Glove.

The sponge study began in June 1955, financed under the Saltonstall-Kennedy Act for the betterment of the domestic fisheries industry.

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