Wholesaler Study Presented at Spring Meeting

In the winter of 2003, growers, SEMAC board members, and staff met with Dr. Nora Barnes, Director of the Center for Marketing Research at UMASS Dartmouth, to discuss marketing issues related to cultured shellfish. What evolved from that first meeting over the next three years was a consumer study, a restaurant study, development of a logo and slogan, several promotional chef’s events, a TV commercial and just this past winter, a survey of seafood wholesalers. All these projects were geared toward promotion and the researching of the “where and how” of the region’s cultured shellfish to determine handling, purchasing and consumer use of our product. The final study was an effort to track down both present and potential buyers and handlers, with the objective “to better understand the wholesale distribution channel in order to more effectively market cultured shellfish from Cape Cod and the Islands.”

The necessity of this information became clearer as promotion and exposure at events, led to questions about availability of cultured product and where it could be purchased. Of the 318 wholesalers of seafood products who were queried, 190 responded to the survey. Of that number, 115 handled live shellfish, 74 handled cultured shellfish, and 39 handled cultured shellfish from Cape Cod and the Islands. 51% of those who responded noted that their sales are driven by both supply and demand, with 89% indicating that quality of the cultured product was most important when considering which brand of cultured shellfish to carry, with appearance and client feedback close behind at 79%. Shelf life and Consistency of supply were also rated as important. Price of the product was only listed by 36% of the respondents as a determining factor for what brand of product to carry.

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SEMAC funded at $81,507.00 for fiscal year 2007, as end of Environmental Bond Bill Nears.

At the June meeting the SEMAC Board of Directors reviewed and voted final approval on budget expenditures for the upcoming fiscal year. Scott Soares, MA Aquaculture Coordinator, was given an early go-ahead this year to develop a contract for the center with funding set at $81,507.00. Board members approved the following budget expenditures: $32,050.00 to fund another round of the research farm network, with the likelihood of contracting with a new group of participants, $18,400.00 will be set aside to continue with marketing and public relations activities, $14,000.00 will fund a direct industry support small grants and scholarship program, $8,157.00 for administration, $3,700.00 to be added to the emergency disease diagnostic account, $3,200.00 for equipment, and $2,000.00 for workshops.

While Board members approved these budget expenditures, some were wondering what happens next year, as they knew the center has an uncertain future. Scott Soares told those in attendance that the Environmental Bond Bill, which provided the legislative authority for yearly funding to three regional centers, was coming to an end, and further funding was very unclear at this point. He noted that it was important that industry members make it known that the efforts of the centers, and associated funding were necessary and vital to industry stability and growth. “SEMAC can’t do its own lobbying,” he said, “it’s now up to the industry to make something happen.”
Abnormal Rainfall Events Impact SEMAC Growers.

By Bill Burt

On the minds of many shellfish growers this spring was the huge bloom of red-tide (PSP) in the spring and early summer of 2005, which shut down their harvest for weeks and sent many scrambling to find work. Some feared that the intense bloom of the previous summer would result in closures this season, and this concern became more worrisome when the Division of Marine Fisheries closed the area from Deer Island to the New Hampshire border under a PSP notice on May 16th. Weather predictions indicated another round of nor’easterly storms, and many thought it would only be a matter of time before red-tide was throughout the region. The next dreaded notice came soon thereafter on the 19th as the harvest areas from Duxbury north to Deer Island were also closed under a PSP notice. However, red-tide did not prove to be the big problem. Mother Nature decided to send us rain, and rain it did. Record amounts of rainfall in Southern New Hampshire and Massachusetts in mid-May resulted in massive flooding with subsequent rainfall closures of harvest areas from New Hampshire to Barnstable and the areas of Buzzards Bay, Gosnold and Falmouth. Just as these closures were seemingly coming to an end, and some areas were re-opening, another unusual and rather fierce nor’easter in early June dumped more than six inches of rain in some areas of Southeastern Massachusetts, forcing DMF to again close areas of the SE coast including areas within Cape Cod and Martha’s Vineyard. The result of these closures meant some growers in selected areas could not harvest product for almost three weeks, which was much more burdensome given last year’s red-tide event.

Tech Talk “To Pit or Not to Pit?”

By Bill Walton

The threat of ice damage has forced intertidal oyster farmers to devise strategies to reduce potential losses. Here in southeastern Massachusetts, some oyster farmers move their oysters from the farm location to a storage area, or ‘seed pit’, that is typically cold (30-40° F) and damp (over 90% relative humidity) for approximately three months. Local farmers have reported typical survival rates of over 90% using this method for first year seed— but it’s a lot of work and time.

What other options are there? Here farmers either leave the oysters on the intertidal farm site or move them to deeper water, below any ice that might form. This past year we did an experiment to see how these methods stacked up. Specifically, we asked:

- What are the typical physical characteristics and average survival of oysters kept in seed pits?
- How do the three methods (pitting, sinking or leaving on the flats) compare in terms of oyster mortality and growth— and do any effects have a carry-over effect through the following growing season?
- Does storage time in a pit affect survival or average revival time of oysters?

What are the typical physical characteristics and average survival of oysters kept in seed pits?

We put temperature/humidity sensors in 9 pits around the region and found that oysters were typically stored in cold (38° F), humid (100.1% relative humidity) conditions, for periods ranging from 45 to 124 days (with an average of 90 days). Survival was over 80% in all the pits and only pit duration seemed to affect survival, with survival decreasing as the number of days stored in the pit went up.

Does storage time in a pit affect survival or average revival time of oysters?

After the third week of pitting and every two weeks thereafter, we took batches of oysters out of a seed pit and put them back in aerated seawater and checked to see how many showed signs of life over 28 days. In the 15th week, batches started to show a significant decrease in survival. Also, the oysters in the first batch (3rd week) revived faster than any of the batches after that.

How do the three methods (pitting, sinking or leaving on the flats) compare in terms of oyster mortality and growth— and do any effects have a carry-over effect through the following growing season?

Not surprisingly, winter mortality was significantly highest among the oysters on the flats (which were crushed under ice), compared to the other two methods. Over the rest of the year (from March to December), the oysters from each of the overwintering methods survived equally well.

Continued page 3
“Spit and Chatter”

By Bethany Walton, Clerk
Massachusetts Aquaculture Association

I would like to thank SEMAC on behalf of the Massachusetts Aquaculture Association (MAA) for the grant award of $18,264 for the 2006 SEMAC Limited Marketing Program. Our proposal, “Increasing Awareness of Cape Cod and Islands Cultured Shellfish: An Industry Initiative” is part of MAA’s efforts to reorganize and become a more active agricultural group that effectively represents its members. MAA will be working with Dr. Nora Barnes and her staff from the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth to continue SEMAC’s effort to promote the Cape Cod and Islands Cultured Shellfish (CCICS) brand.

MAA will focus on the following four areas in our proposed project: 1) Produce a TV commercial promoting the region’s cultured shellfish, 2) Implement a pilot program of bags with the CCICS logo. We will also purchase stamping equipment with the CCICS logo so that members who already have bags can add this logo to the existing bag, 3) Plan a fall tasting event of CCICS targeting chefs and wholesalers. We have already set the venue to be at Shakers Piano Bar in Plainville, MA for this September. Finally, we plan to redesign the MAA website to serve as a platform to help promote the CCICS campaign.

MAA will continue to build on the prior work done by SEMAC and Dr. Barnes which indicated that previous marketing efforts did indeed increase awareness of the CCICS brand. The TV commercial that we are planning to air will be shown via Comcast, but will be shown both in the southeastern Mass. area and in the coastal communities around the South Shore to expand our efforts. The product bags featuring the CCICS logo can be distributed to MAA members at a discount price after members purchase a minimum number to be determined. We are hopeful that this effort will result in a larger purchase from MAA for the following season of these product bags before members purchase them individually. We also hope to continue distributing the stamping for members to use on existing product bags. This fall’s chefs and wholesalers event will include a pairing of CCICS products with a local vineyard and a cooking demonstration that showcases our cultured shellfish. MAA would also like to use this event as a platform to inform chefs and wholesalers about our redesigned website as a source of information for them to purchase products.

Finally, the existing MAA website will be linked with the CCICS website and be updated to provide visitors to the site, particularly chefs and wholesalers, with a simplified process to order product. We also plan to include forums for the members, trustees, and officers to conduct business online with one another.

Spit and Chatter is a Column set aside for our Growers. If you would like to contribute an article for our fall and winter edition. Contact Bill Burt at wburt@umext.umass.edu

Tech talk continued

Also not surprisingly, the oysters sunk in deep water showed an increase shell length over the winter (although small) while the other two methods did not grow.

Surprisingly though, the oysters overwintered sunk in deep water ended the year with the smallest increase in shell length!

To summarize, overwintering oysters in a seed pit avoids the risk of ice damage, which can inflict significant mortality. To our surprise, pitted oysters did not lose any growth in the following year. In fact, unexpectedly, the oysters kept in the water over the winter had the smallest growth. This was perhaps due to the metabolic costs of remaining active through the food-poor winter.

Additionally, the first year oyster seed survived well under a variety of pit conditions, suggesting they are relatively resilient. Importantly, survival tended to decrease with storage time and oyster farmers report a sharp increase in overwintering mortality with increasing age of stored oysters.

In addition to the presented data, oyster farmers reported that placing oysters in seed pits reduced fouling both through direct mortality of any fouling organisms stored with the oysters (e.g., blue mussels) and the avoidance of any late winter/early spring sets of fouling organisms.

Therefore, of the tested methods, pitting oysters seems to provide the best combination of survival and growth. Despite the perceived risks and the considerable labor involved in seed pitting, this method is recommended as an excellent method of overwintering oyster seed.

-B. Walton, B. Still & D. Murphy

A full report of the data is in preparation for publication in the Journal of Shellfish Research and is available upon request.
The complete findings of the survey report will soon be available on the SEMAC website at:

After analyzing the report the marketing center made several recommendations including the following:

1. Opportunities for market expansion exist on all levels of wholesalers, with quality being the focus of future campaigns.
2. Brand publicity should be continued, with the logo and slogan made highly visible.
3. Chef’s events, receptions or festivals need to be scheduled and planned one year in advance and held twice a year.
4. More TV commercials were recommended, as the post Red-tide commercial was seen by a large number of wholesalers.
5. The Cape Cod and the Islands Cultured Shellfish web site needs to be actively marketed, promoted and updated.

These recommendations were largely accepted by the SEMAC marketing subcommittee, and were included in a marketing RFP which went out earlier this spring. The Massachusetts Aquaculture Association responded with a proposal and it was awarded $18,264.00 to conduct the next round of marketing activities.

See the column entitled: “Spit and Chatter” on page 3 to read more about upcoming marketing plans.

Upcoming Events

2006

September 19th SEMAC Board Meeting 9:30AM Farmhouse Conference Room, Rt. 6A Barnstable, MA

September 25th Chef’s Event Promoting Cape Cod and Islands Cultured Shellfish - Shakers Piano Bar - Plainville, MA

October 20th - Massachusetts Aquaculture Summit - Hemisphere Restaurant, Sandwich, MA

The MA Aquaculture Association’s Annual meeting will be held in conjunction with the summit.

November 14th - SEMAC Board Meeting (tentatively scheduled, time and location to be announced later)

December 6th-8th Northeast Aquaculture Conference and Exposition held in conjunction with the 27th Milford Aquaculture Seminar Mystic Marriott Hotel & Spa, Groton, CT

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