

DHEC limits oystering in May River headwaters

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May 8, 2009

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Oystering in the May River headwaters will be stopped for two weeks after heavy rainfalls next harvest season because of rising fecal coliform bacteria levels, a state Department of Health and Environmental Control official said Thursday.

The reclassification to “conditionally approved” from “approved” — which allows unrestricted harvesting except during a hurricane or tropical storm warning — will become official after the U.S. Food and Drug Administration reviews DHEC’s decision, said David Baize, DHEC Bureau of Water assistant bureau chief.

“The classification is up to us to make, but it obviously has to be supported and FDA would have the right to question it. But we have all the data we need to make that decision. We’ve already talked to FDA about this area; we’re comfortable managing it (next season) as conditionally approved,” Baize said. All of the affected oyster beds, in about a four-mile stretch running east from DHEC monitoring station No. 19-19 near Rose Dhu Creek’s mouth on the May, are leased by Larry Toomer for harvesting and sales by the Bluffton Oyster Co. on Wharf Street, the state’s last remaining oyster shucking plant.

DHEC told town officials in late 2008 that the station was a fecal coliform hot spot and might trigger a closure of harvesting in the headwaters.

With the “conditional” classification in DHEC’s shellfish sanitation program for public health and safety, each rain-fall event of 1.1 inches or more would automatically close the affected beds for at least 14 days. Before reopening, DHEC would draw a sample in the area to make sure the fecal coliform level is below the risk standard, Baize said. Here viewed the classification decision and related topics in an April 23 letter to Tim Bennett, Bluffton Deputy Town Manager, which DHEC released. The reclassification “would allow, depending upon rainfall, this area to be open about an estimated 75 percent of normal,” Baize said in the letter.

In South Carolina, oyster sea son opens sometime between mid-September and Oct. 1 each year and runs through mid- May, depending on water temperature levels. This season will close May 16. DHEC’s shellfish sanitation program reclassifies shellfish beds annually, based on analysis of a data base from a minimum 30 samples DHEC draws monthly to test fecal coliform levels — an indicator of consumption safety — at designated monitoring stations over the three previous calendar years.

When changing fecal coliform levels at one station trigger a reclassification, the revision goes to the nearest monitoring station with a better rating. On the May River, the downgraded area would run east to Station No. 19-24 at Crane Island. The rest of the river will keep its “approved” classification.

Toomer said Thursday that he was not surprised by the reclassification decision. “It affects us but it’s better to be safe than sorry, so to speak.

The last thing in the world that we want to do is harvest or sell a product that’s not perfect. There are just rules that the FDA places on the state they have to abide by,” Toomer said. “I’m much happier to have it conditionally approved than restricted and have to wait for three years before it could ever be harvested at all.” Baize’s letter also addresses a proposed town initiative to assist DHEC in stepping up monitoring at three new stations DHEC established in the past two months in the reclassification area. He suggests the town hire a consultant to draw three samples per month from the stations, from May through December. That, combined with DHEC monthly sampling, would meet the minimum FDA requirement for 30 samples to be considered for the next reclassification period, he said. He said DHEC’s two FDA certified labs are operating at capacity but DHEC would consider a multi-year agreement for the town to fund a full-time lab person and supplies, at a cost of about \$65,000.

Bennett said the town’s Water body Management Plan Implementation Committee will review the new information at a 10 a.m. Thursday meeting at Town Hall. Baize also said DHEC has committed to provide a

\$483,000 Clean Water Act grant to the town “for developing and implementing best management practices to reduce loading of bacteria to the May River.” That, his letter said, “is the best long-term solution to keeping the shellfish harvesting in the May River open and safe for consumption.”