

State to limit shellfish harvesting along the May River

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May River shellfish beds that previously have been closed only because of tropical storms or hurricanes will be limited to harvesters next season, according to the S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control.

The current shellfish season ends Friday. The next one opens in mid-September.

Based on three years of data showing rising fecal coliform levels, DHEC plans to close shell fishing for a year from the river's headwaters to Rose Dhu Creek, said David Baize, assistant chief of the Bureau of Water. That portion of the river would be considered a "restricted" area.

That means water quality in the upper reaches of the river does not meet state and federal standards, making the oysters growing there unsafe to eat. DHEC does not allow harvesting in restricted areas, but allows the oysters there to be relocated to cleaner waters where shellfish grounds are open.

From just below Rose Dhu Creek to Crane Island -- located about four miles downstream on the outskirts of downtown Bluffton -- DHEC plans to close shellfish beds when it rains more than 1.1 inches, Baize said.

That four-mile stretch would be designated a "conditionally approved" site. Many rivers and creeks in Beaufort County hold this designation and are closed to shell fishing after storms drop more than 1.1 inches of rain. Shell fishing reopens when water quality sampling indicates bacteria levels are safe for harvesting, which usually takes about two weeks, Baize said.

DHEC officials at first thought they would have to restrict shell fishing from the headwaters to Crane Island because they weren't sure they had enough staff to conduct the intensive water quality sampling conditional areas require.

"We've decided that we can manage that area," Baize said. "With the budget situation, it's tough for us to find the resources to do that, but we think we've found a way."

Larry Toomer of the Bluffton Oyster Company is the only harvester licensed to take shellfish in the May River from its headwaters to Crane Island.

"We harvest in the headwaters very, very rarely, so that's not going to be a major problem as far as our production," Toomer said. "I'd much rather it be closed for the safety standpoint of it."

Toomer said the limit on shell fishing downstream is "going to hurt some."

"It's going to be one of those things we just have to deal with," he said. "We'll manage it to the best of our ability because the last thing in the world we want to do is take a chance of harvesting or selling anything that's not perfect."

WHAT'S BEING DONE

The fecal coliform bacteria results from human or animal fecal matter. Water quality analyses paid for by the town of Bluffton and Beaufort County indicate the bacteria is coming from human and bird waste.

Leaky septic tanks, wildlife or pet waste and stormwater runoff have been identified as potential sources. Runoff, often classified as the first inch of rain, picks up contaminants and bacteria from roads and parking lots on its way to the river.

Officials also have said the volume of runoff flowing into the river reduces the salinity necessary to break down bacteria, which is causing the high pollution counts.

To improve the river, DHEC plans to give Bluffton a \$483,000 grant to reduce pollution loads. The money could pay for systems to hold pet waste, rain barrels and rain gardens to collect and absorb contaminants in runoff and ultraviolet light systems to kill bacteria in stormwater ponds.

Local officials also hope to conduct water-quality sampling at three new stations DHEC added in March along the four-mile stretch. When DHEC closes shellfish grounds, it must do so from the contaminated area to the next station where fecal levels meet state and federal standards. In this case, that's the station near Crane Island. With three stations in between, local officials hope more sampling could better define the problem and limit shellfish closures.

However, DHEC is required to collect 30 samples before the new stations are considered official testing sites. With current staffing, DHEC could only sample once a month. At that rate, it would take about three years to obtain the data.

Local officials said they could send town and county staff to collect weekly samples at the new sites. Legislation has passed the state's House and Senate to grant testing authority to local governments. It now requires approval from the governor.

Jeff McNesby, Bluffton's environmental protection director, said Bluffton and Beaufort County developed a May River "war plan" to address pollution problems earlier this year because officials expected DHEC to close shellfish beds.

"We're disappointed that (closures) had to happen but ... we wanted to be ready when we were officially notified," he said.

The official notification came in an April 23 letter, which said that depending on rainfall, shellfish beds would be open about 75 percent of the time.

"I'm saddened by it," said Bluffton Mayor Lisa Sulka. "It is a huge deal. We are trying to figure out where it's coming from and what we can do to make it better."