App.com, 3 Oct 11

New attempt to restore oysters in Raritan Bay

HIGHLANDS — Slowly but surely, thousands of baby oysters are getting bigger, their little shells expanding and getting tougher.

And the day is fast approaching for them to begin their new lives as an ambitious science experiment that just might help clean up a polluted New Jersey waterway.

The NY/NJ Baykeeper environmental group, assisted by volunteers anxious to see the project succeed, is readying the oysters for a pilot project to see if colonies can be successfully started in polluted waters. The oysters filter water and strain out harmful contaminants, so if large amounts of them can be re-established in the Raritan Bay, researchers hope it might help improve water quality in the heavily used waterway.

Beth Ravit, who teaches environmental science at Rutgers University and is leading the oyster program, recently checked on the progress of her little charges, which are growing on larger clam shells inside mesh bags tied to a dock where the group's experiment is based.

"That one's starting to look like a real reef!" she exulted while looking at one group that was doing exceptionally well. "I look at this, and it's like watching Darwin in action!"

The oyster program itself is testimony to the survival of the fittest, as New Jersey environmental officials had pulled the plug on the Baykeeper's last attempt at re-establishing oysters in the Raritan Bay last year.

The state Department of Environmental Protection forced the group to remove and destroy 30,000 oysters from the bay because New Jersey wasn't complying with patrol requirements to make sure no shellfish were being harvested from contaminated waters. The FDA threatened to shut down New Jersey's shellfish industry, and the state ordered all research-related commercial species of shellfish removed from contaminated waters.

The danger was that poachers would steal the oysters and either eat them themselves or sell them to seafood outlets, potentially sickening the public and threatening the reputation of New Jersey's nearly $800 million shellfish industry.

Then last month, the Navy came to the rescue.

New Jersey announced it would allow Baykeeper to try to establish oyster colonies on the pier that supports Earle Naval Weapons Station in Middletown. The group then got the go-ahead to place oysters in the heavily guarded waters around the pier, which no people or boats can approach without permission from the military. The plan also got the approval of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

"This is such an excellent project," said Nancy Harrison, whose husband, Capt. David Harrison, is Earle's commanding officer. "We are just thrilled that they are here."

She and others spent a recent Sunday morning measuring, counting, bagging and tagging small oysters that will soon be transplanted to the Earle pier. They counted out 50 small oysters for each of the four shelves of the collapsible oyster cages that will be used in the project, and placed them inside. The size of each was recorded, to be compared with measurements to be taken next May to determine how well the oysters fared over the winter.

"The first question we're trying to answer is, 'Can they live in the Earle water?' " Ravit said. In last year's project, based in Keyport, 70 percent of the oysters placed on the bay floor survived the winter, which she called an encouraging number.

If the new oysters do well at the Navy pier, Baykeeper plans to petition the state to allow it to do a large-scale program. The ultimate goal is to re-establish oyster colonies in the bay and have them help remove contaminants from the water, which is heavily used by commercial fishermen, clammers and boaters.

There are more than one billion clams in Raritan Bay, but for all intents and purposes, oysters have been wiped out there, victims of overharvesting and pollution.

"When colonists first came to the bay, there were oysters the size of dinner plates," Ravit said. In fact, there were so many oysters that early navigation charts marked individual reefs as hazards to shipping, because the oysters had piled so high atop one another.

Mike Adams of Highland Park heard about the project online and wanted to be part of it.

“I’m really interested in pollution issues,” he said

Ravit said she hopes to put the oysters in the water off Earle by Wednesday.

Beth Ravit, a Rutgers University researcher, explains her oyster restoration project to volunteers in Highlands N.J. on Sept. 25, 2011. The NY/NJ Baykeeper environmental group is growing small oysters and will transplant them in early October to a Navy pier in Middletown N.J. to see if they can help improve water quality by filtering out contaminants. (AP Photo/Wayne Parry) / Wayne Parry/AP