

# Morning Star

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## Oysters move to new home

### Relay relocates shellfish to cleaner waters to improve future harvest

BY SAM SCOTT

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WRIGHTSVILLE BEACH - If the clean water can't come to the shellfish, the shellfish can come to the clean water.

Fishermen and state workers gave thousands of oysters a lift Tuesday, moving them from polluted waters in Lee's Cut to cleaner homes in nearby Banks Channel.

The move - called an oyster relay - helps replenish oyster harvests, said Stephen Taylor with N.C. Marine Fisheries Service, which oversees the process. This year the oyster season, which usually runs from Oct. 15 to March 31, ended two weeks early because of dwindling stock, he said.

The oysters were taken from among the nearly 8,000 acres of New Hanover County water closed to shellfishing because of pollution. The relocated mollusks can cleanse themselves within two weeks in their new homes, Mr. Taylor said.

Fishermen received \$1.50 for each bushel delivered to the state's barge, which moved them to their final location, where they can be harvested next season. Quick hands can pick 200 bushels in a good day, workers said.

In season, commercial fishermen are allowed to take five bushels a day, the difference being that Tuesday's oysters were picked without mind to salability.

But with wind keeping the tide up, and cold weather, totals were down Tuesday from the 1,000 bushels that get picked during a more typical relay, Mr. Taylor said. Six boats picked about 760 bushels - still a mountain of shellfish.

The normally annual event was canceled last year because of state budget woes. Later this week the relay will move to Futch Creek and next week to Sneads Ferry.

Not everybody is a fan of the process. Longtime beach resident Bobby Russ complained that the artificial migration damages the environment.

"Since they started this program, the menhaden have reduced drastically, the crabs are nonexistent, the shrimps - you can't even find them," said Dr. Russ, a retired dentist.

A single 3-inch oyster can cleanse roughly 50 gallons of water a day. Dr. Russ said the area missed that benefit.

The state, however, maintains the move is harmless, a conclusion backed by Martin Posey, a marine biologist with the University of North Carolina at Wilmington.

Dr. Posey agreed with Dr. Russ's observation of a suffering ecosystem, but said the relay had no impact on a problem rooted in larger issues like increased runoff from changes in land use.

Cape Fear Coastkeeper Ted Wilgis said the relay was a temporary solution to a much bigger problem.



STAFF PHOTO - KEN BLEVINS

Sterling Singletary (left) and Alex Kuigre collect oysters in Lee's Cut at Wrightsville Beach on Tuesday for the Marine Fisheries oyster relay. The oysters are moved from contaminated waters and placed in cleaner areas where they can grow and be harvested next season.