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Connecticut oyster industry could gain from disaster in the Gulf

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Douglas Healey/AP

Oyster fishermen off-load bags of oysters collected in Long Island Sound to the dock of Hillard Bloom Shellfish in South Norwalk. Experts say the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico could mean higher profits and the potential for growth for the shell fisheries in Long Island Sound.

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Hartford - Connecticut's oyster industry has seen its share of hardships, from parasites that nearly wiped out the shellfish in the 1990s to storms this spring that washed away entire beds.

But another disaster, the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, could mean higher profits and the potential for growth in the Long Island Sound oyster industry, experts say.

"The larger customers and distributors and wholesalers in the South that can't get their hands on the product that they need are now looking north," said Tom Kehoe, a Long Island wholesaler and president of the East Coast Shellfish Growers Association. "And that's starting to drive the price."

Gulf fisheries account for about 60 percent of the oysters eaten in the United States, but Louisiana's oyster industry was brought to a standstill after oil began gushing into the Gulf in April. Experts estimate that about 40 percent of the oyster beds in the Gulf remain open.

If the supply problems in the Gulf continue, Kehoe said, the price

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for Connecticut oysters could double in the next year. Connecticut oysters currently sell for about 60 to 75 cents each to wholesalers, said Tessa Getchis, a University of Connecticut researcher who studies the industry for the national Sea Grant project.

Long Island Sound and the Chesapeake Bay are the only other large oyster producers on the East Coast, but their harvest is a fraction of what's pulled from the waters of the Gulf, she said.

There are about 40 companies involved in shellfishing in Connecticut. They farm 22,422 acres of oyster grounds - about 35 square miles - leased by the state and about 67,000 acres of privately owned grounds. Louisiana, by comparison, has more than 420,000 acres of oyster grounds.

It's not clear how many oysters are produced in Connecticut because oystermen stopped reporting that to the state several years ago, when state legislation was proposed to tax the harvest, said David Carey, director of the state's Bureau of Aquaculture.

"They can harvest as much from those grounds as they want," he said. "That, of course, depends on what nature puts there and what you put there physically. So, yes they can increase production."

But don't expect an overnight oyster boom in Connecticut to replace the Gulf oysters.

For one thing, Getchis said, most Connecticut oysters are very high quality, cultivated and sold alive and whole to restaurants and seafood stores. Much of the Gulf product consists of lower-quality oysters that grow wild. Most are harvested, shucked and canned.

"It's a different product," she said. "It's much more expensive to produce an oyster up here, and the value is much higher."

Many oyster growers are already operating at peak capacity, and with high costs of waterfront property and dock space, it's unlikely new businesses will open in response to the Gulf spill, said Ken Gall, a Sea Grant researcher from Cornell University.

"But certainly, existing suppliers, depending on their situation, will be able to increase their harvest to take advantage of the market opportunities," he said.

Leslie Miklovich has been in the oyster business her whole life. She is vice president of Hillard Bloom Shellfish Inc. in Norwalk, which has 12 boats and about 45 employees who work about 20,000 acres of oyster beds.

It takes about three years to grow an oyster, a process that involves seeding beds with oyster larvae, then transplanting new oysters to deeper waters, where they are eventually harvested, she said.

The company can guarantee a certain, stable number of oysters to its distributors - but anything more is up to Mother Nature. Oysters grow faster in shallow water, so they could plant young oysters in shallower beds to increase production.

"The price is starting to climb," she said. "But right now, everything we catch, we sell to our regular customers that we've been dealing with for years. I think my wholesalers are picking up their business a little bit, but we can only produce so much. I don't think we could ever produce what the Gulf produces."

Oystering is a risky business, she said, and growth is often cautious.

The industry was almost wiped out in the 1990s when two parasites, Dermo and MSX, killed much of the oyster population in the sound.

Storms and star fish, which eat oysters, also can wreak havoc with production.

A lot of the growth in the industry is with small, boutique oyster

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"gardeners," who supply one or two local restaurants or stores, Gall said. But there is potential for long-term growth in Long Island Sound, especially through cultivation and farming, should the demand remain high, he said.

And some industry experts fear the worst in the Gulf.

"If you took a 55-gallon drum of motor oil and dumped it in your front lawn, it would be there four years from now," Kehoe said. "As this oil settles into the oyster beds in the Gulf, its going to damage the oyster beds in the Gulf for we don't know how long."

Larry Williams, owner of a Milford-based shellfish company, Jessie D Inc., said he's expecting only a minor bump in his business because of the spill. He said he is more concerned that his fuel costs will be going up as the result of a moratorium on deep-sea drilling.

"We might ultimately benefit from a move in the marketplace because they are not putting as much into the market as they have been historically," he said. "But I would trade that in a heartbeat for some answers to help them out down there and safeguard our supply of petroleum."

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