

Prize catch for fisheries

01:00 AM EDT on Tuesday, April 22, 2008

By Paul Edward Parker
Journal Staff Writer

The Providence Journal / Mary Murphy

NORTH KINGSTOWN — U.S. Sen. Jack Reed yesterday praised the state's fledgling shellfish aquaculture industry and discussed how \$400,000 in federal money approved this fiscal year will help bolster the fish farmers.

"We all understand how important Narragansett Bay is to the state," Reed said, against a backdrop of commercial fishing boats at the town wharf. "Harnessing the Bay, all its potential, is one of the challenges we face." He said aquaculture not only

provides jobs, but also ensures the safety and quality of seafood.

The \$400,000 Reed discussed will go toward two projects. One is developing ways of mapping soils in shallow coastal waters, something that has never been done on a large scale. The other project involves two testing programs, one to measure the levels of cadmium, mercury and other metals in Rhode Island shellfish and the other to develop tests to rapidly detect harmful bacteria in shellfish before it is delivered to the retail market.



Sen. Jack Reed, left, listens at the Town Dock in Wickford yesterday as Peter August, director of the URI Coastal Institute, talks about shellfish aquaculture. At right is Robert Rheault, president of Moonstone Oysters.

Shellfish aquaculture is a small, but rapidly growing business in Rhode Island. In 1997, the cultured oyster harvest here was valued at less than \$200,000. Last year, it climbed to more than \$1.5 million, according to figures released yesterday by Robert B. Rheault, president of the East Coast Shellfish Growers Association and president of Moonstone Oysters, an aquaculture company. The harvest was about a third the value of the state's wild-clam fishery, according to Rheault.

About \$260,000 of the federal money will go toward the two testing programs.

Besides developing a test for harmful bacteria, researchers will also map where and when the bacteria appear in Rhode Island shellfish and in the marine environment.

The tests for metals will compare levels in several species: American oysters and hard clams collected along the East Coast; Asian oysters grown experimentally in Maryland, Virginia and North Carolina; and Pacific oysters from the West Coast.

The results of all the tests will be shared with researchers and the industry nationwide.

About \$140,000 of the federal money will go toward the soil-mapping program.

Peter A. August, director of the University of Rhode Island's Coastal Institute, said that soil maps, which describe what types of soils are found where, are an invaluable tool for land-based farmers when deciding where to locate different agricultural activities. "It's exactly the same underwater," he said. "Many of our working lands are underwater in our shallow coastal environment."

For decades, the federal government has mapped soils for farmers. But, August said, "they stopped where the ocean hit the land."

He said it is important to have accurate maps of submerged soils because "certain kinds of soil are better than others for certain kinds of shellfish."

The project involves not only making the maps, but also figuring out how to collect the data on the submerged soils. "We're making this stuff up as we go along. It's a virgin area," August said. "We have to develop the methods to map them, the names to call them."

The \$400,000 was part of a larger appropriation for the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service that President Bush signed into law Dec. 26.

pparker@projo.com