

First phase of RI EQIP Oyster Restoration Project near completion.

Background

In April 2008, NRCS awarded \$792,000 through EQIP to eight Rhode Island Shellfish farmers to implement oyster habitat restoration in Rhode Island waters. The goal of this effort is to increase essential oyster reef habitats to benefit a wide range of aquatic organisms and improve water quality simultaneously. NRCS funded shellfish farmers will be growing, rearing, and transplanting 4 million oysters a year for three years using approved seed on shell oyster setting techniques.



RI shellfish farmers are responsible for obtaining certified seed on shell oyster larvae, grow out of juvenile oysters for 5 months on their farms, and cultch and transplant oysters to approved oyster habitat restoration locations. This will result in an approximately 16 acres of oyster reef habitat throughout Narragansett Bay and the South Shore coastal lagoons.

Oyster Restoration Process in 2008

The 2008 RI EQIP Oyster Restoration program was initially slated for implementation in the spring/summer of 2009. However, due to the enthusiasm of several shellfish farmers, six out of eight growers decided to begin the process in May of this year.

The six farmers obtained shell fragments called “cultch” from a shellfish shucking house in late May. The cultch was subsequently put in mesh bags and cleaned several times. In early June, the bags of cultch were delivered to a shellfish hatchery in Danvers MA where



they were put into large tank for the oyster setting process. Over the next week, oyster larvae were added to the tank and allowed to set (attach) on the shell.

On June 13th, the five shellfish farmers picked up the newly set oysters on cultch and brought them back to Rhode Island where they were put into their individual oyster grow-out systems and left to grow.

Oysters have remained on the farms since mid June, functioning as living artificial reefs. Farmers have maintained the growing conditions by handling oysters, moving them into larger cages to accommodate idealized water circulation and feeding efficiency.

Next Steps for 2008

As of September 2008, the oysters have grown significantly. Some have even reached two inches in size, however the growth rate varies from farm to farm as it is affected by farm location and water depth among other factors.

Beginning in October farmers will start transplanting the oysters on cultch to several designated areas near their farm. Depending on the location, additional shell fragments may be added to the bottom to add additional support for the reef. This initial reef creation signifies the end of Phase I. Farmers will monitor over-winter mortality in the spring of 2009 and begin the process all over again next May.