

SEA GRANT

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Oyster lovers better get ready for some changes coming down the track. At the October meeting of the Interstate Shellfish Sanitation Conference (ISSC), the US Food & Drug Administration announced that, effective in 2011, all oysters harvested from the Gulf of Mexico during the warmer months of the year would have to receive some form of post-harvest processing to ensure that the oysters were free of any contamination by the potentially fatal bacteria, *Vibrio vulnificus*. What does all that mean? There are all sorts of implications for oystermen, processors, restaurant operators, but the upshot is that consumers would no longer be able to purchase and consume live, raw oysters on the half shell harvested from the Gulf of Mexico during the warmer months.

The FDA's rationale for this decision is very direct. *Vibrio vulnificus* is a naturally occurring dangerous bacterium that is associated with the warm waters of the Gulf of Mexico and causes about 15 deaths a year in the US of people who consume raw oysters (and usually among at risk groups of people with compromised immune systems). The oyster industry has developed several methods of treating oysters after harvest that kills this bacterium, including quick freezing, high pressure, mild heat, and low dose gamma radiation. These post-harvest treatments produce oysters that are intended to be safe and satisfy the consumer. The FDA believes that the capacity exists to treat all oysters harvested from the Gulf with these methods and, therefore, all oysters harvested from the Gulf of Mexico during the warmer months should be treated.

The industry, by the way, had been working with the FDA and the states through the ISSC to educate at risk consumers and develop and implement new harvest regulations that were intended to lower the risk of *Vibrio vulnificus* contamination (e.g., limiting harvest to cooler times of the day, having on-board refrigeration) to help save lives. Though many of these changes are due to be implemented in 2010, the FDA apparently decided that these measures wouldn't be adequate.

This ban, though, clearly raises a number of questions and potential problems. Many in the industry question whether treated oysters are acceptable to consumers as substitutes for raw oysters in terms of taste and texture. Additionally, treated oysters may very well cost more. It's not at all clear how those factors would affect the overall demand and market for oysters, and therefore those that depend on the oyster market for a living. Will local restaurants look to other parts of the country as sources for oysters, displacing local suppliers? How will small wholesale dealers afford the costly post-treatment equipment? Will this seasonal ban eventually expand to year-round and include other naturally occurring bacteria?

No one that I know in the oyster industry wants anyone to die of oysters. Put bluntly, aside from our common humanity (which seems to be too easily put aside), it's bad for business. The question here is whether the FDA's solution suits the nature and scale of the problem. A friend heard about this and asked me right away how many people die a year from salmonella, an infection most commonly contracted from handling raw eggs and poultry. I got curious and looked it up; turns out that some 500 or so people a year in the US die from salmonella infections.

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