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If you've read any of my columns before, you likely have figured out that I love oysters. I also enjoy the people who make their living harvesting, shucking, selling, preparing and serving these shellfish. So it's with some trepidation that I approach the topic of oyster harvest closures, a subject that's been in the news quite a bit lately. People in the business rightfully worry about bad publicity; a fair amount of the general public will read about closures and just decide to not eat oysters at all. This column is not for those people; rather, this column is for the oyster lovers out there who want to better understand why those closures happen and the safeguards in place to protect public health. Those closures mean, in fact, that the system is working.

The first thing to understand is that the states have agreed to a National Shellfish Sanitation Plan (NSSP), which is intended 'promote and improve the sanitation of shellfish' by setting uniform standards among states. Under the NSSP, waters are classified (based on water samples, shoreline surveys, and evaluations of the effects of factors such as rainfall, tidal influence, etc.) and given 'rules' for harvest based on long-term sampling and predictable events. For example, the public reefs in Mobile Bay are within what are called 'conditionally approved' areas where harvest is allowed unless there has been substantial rainfall (measured by river stage at the Barry Steam Plant, Bucks, AL) that could lead to elevated bacteria levels.

In addition to the classifications of growing waters, any area also has a 'status', including open and closed. What triggers a change from open to closed status?

1. A hazardous discharge or spill or other 'emergency condition', such as an approaching severe storm or hurricane;
2. The presence of biotoxins (produced by harmful algal blooms), which can be detected with water samples before they pose a threat to human health from eating shellfish;
3. Reaching the target level in the management plan of a conditionally approved area, such as the river stage or other measure of rainfall; and

4. Failure of the regulating authority to keep up with the sampling and reviews required of open areas. Looking at each of these, they all default to closed whenever there's even a question that the shellfish might not be safe to eat. If there's a hint of trouble, the status changes to closed. That's hard on the industry and isn't good publicity, but it is good public health protection.

Areas can be closed for other reasons. First, harvest on public reefs can be halted as a fisheries management measure, as is currently the case in Alabama, to allow the oyster population to recover. Second, occasionally there are outbreaks (such as the suspected norovirus outbreak in Louisiana recently); in cases where people do get sick and shellfish are implicated, the public health authorities typically close the area and require testing of the waters and shellfish to make sure they are safe to eat before re-opening harvest. Finally, oysters relayed from restricted or conditionally restricted areas (as was just done in Alabama) are not allowed to be harvested until they have been allowed to purge themselves in clean waters. That makes some consumers pause, but it should be noted that relayed oysters are allowed to be harvested only after the meats have been tested and determined to be safe for human consumption.

So while closures typically generate bad publicity, it's also a sign that there is an extensive system in place to protect human health that is doing its job.

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