

Aid OK'd for 2005 shellfish closures

By ELBERT AULL, Portland Press Herald Writer

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Congress approved \$5 million in federal relief this week for New England shellfish harvesters affected by last year's devastating red tides - just as another round of algae blooms closed Maine clam flats.

The aid comes after some political wrangling on Capitol Hill, and as concerns mount about recent closures because of flooding and red tide.

"I think we're going to see a worse year," said RJ Mere, a member of Kennebunk's Shellfish Committee and a recreational clam digger.

The state banned shellfish harvesting in varying degrees from the New Hampshire border to Owls Head Light this week because of red tide. Some of the areas were

closed earlier this year because of runoff from heavy rain that flooded York County.

Last year, the worst New England red tide prompted harvesting bans and restrictions that lasted more than a month, triggering a federal disaster declaration in late June because of economic losses in the millions of dollars.

John Lyon, 54, of Scarborough, a commercial digger for about 40 years, estimated he lost \$20,000 in income last year.

The warm winter meant many diggers worked hard to recoup their summer losses, but the extra harvesting just depressed prices, Lyon said.

"It's always something," he said.

Lyon said a "very, very, very small percentage" of harvesters he knows took advantage of the low-interest loans offered after the 2005 red tide, because the application process was too complicated.

"It's more to serve business owners," he said of the Small Business Administration loans offered in the immediate aftermath of the closures.

Money from this week's appropriation will go through two federal agencies and ultimately will be disbursed by the state Department of Marine Resources.

The \$5 million aid package was approved Wednesday in the House and Thursday in the Senate. The request survived a political challenge and "intense" debate that whittled it down from \$20 million, said Antonia Ferrier, a spokeswoman for Sen. Olympia Snowe, R-Maine.

The request drew support from every senator in Maine and Massachusetts, the two states hit hardest by the 2005 red tide.

"It was a challenge. I heard at the beginning of the week that we didn't even have any money in there," Ferrier said.

The money was included in an emergency supplemental bill that also provided funds for wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as Hurricane Katrina relief.

It was one of 19 proposed spending items in the supplemental bill that Sen. Tom Coburn, R-Okla., criticized as indefensible "pork barrel" spending and sought to remove in early May.

Ferrier said the New England relief proposal was slashed amid pressure to keep spending down.

"We certainly understand that a lot of shellfishermen are going through some tough times," she said.

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