



DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

INFORMATION SERVICE

OFFICE OF COORDINATOR OF FISHERIES

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The traditional oyster season opens Wednesday with the prospect of fewer but bigger and better oysters for civilians, Coordinator of Fisheries Harold L. Ickes announced today.

There will be fewer oysters for civilian cocktails and stews because the armed services will consume some 40,000 gallons a week. Many U. S. oysters will, however, be larger and fatter because this year the important New England beds are showing a complete recovery from the after-effects of the destructive hurricane which swept the East coast in 1938.

This week oystermen are getting their boats painted, their plants cleaned up to be ready for business which starts slowly in September, picks up in October, and reaches its peak in the holiday months of November and December.

A very considerable amount of labor is involved in getting a quart of oysters on the table and oystermen this fall are having their full share of manpower worries. Over half of U.S. oysters are now cultivated. This means that to produce a large part of this year's crop, tons of shells were laid on oyster bottoms four or five years ago, young oysters transplanted from seeding to growing grounds, and a four year watch begun to keep starfish and other enemies away. After marketable oysters are gathered, they must be shucked, packed, and iced. To fill a gallon container it takes from 150 to 450 Eastern oysters.

If the oyster industry is able to solve its manpower problem and the almost equally difficult problem of getting enough satisfactory containers, the country will get about its normal supply -- approximately 90,000,000 pounds of meats.

Oyster production, due largely to overfishing of natural reefs, is today less than half as great as it was fifty years ago. Maryland produced about 70,000,000 pounds a year in the early '90s; now production is down to some 20,000,000 pounds. Production in Virginia, second most important oyster state, has fallen from 35,000,000 to 16,000,000 pounds. New York production is down from 19,000,000 pounds to about 6,000,000; New Jersey from 15,000,000 to 5,000,000; Connecticut from 14,000,000 to 5,000,000.

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On the other hand production in some states has gone up. Louisiana, for instance, has increased its annual oyster production from less than 4,000,000 pounds fifty years ago to more than 13,000,000 pounds today. Mississippi and South Carolina, both have shown increases and on the West Coast a lively oyster industry has developed in the state of Washington.

Coordinator Ickes recently suggested a "state management" plan which, it is hoped, will materially increase production in those states whose oysters beds have suffered from over-fishing.