



# DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

## INFORMATION SERVICE

### FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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Mortality of oysters in a 100-square-mile section of upper Chesapeake Bay, ranging as high as 75 per cent on certain bars in this area, has been disclosed by a joint survey in which the Federal Government and the State of Maryland cooperated, Acting Director Milton C. James of the Fish and Wildlife Service reported today to Secretary of the Interior, J. A. Krug.

The survey covered 44 major oyster bars in the upper part of Chesapeake Bay and was carried out by the Fish and Wildlife Service and the Maryland Departments of Tidewater Fisheries and of Research and Education.

Recent mortality on these bars, affecting both young and adult oysters, varied from 7 to 75 per cent of all oysters present and was found to be most severe in the northern part of the affected area, gradually decreasing toward the south.

Along the Eastern Shore the affected grounds were found to extend from the uppermost bars, in the vicinity of Poole's Island, about 20 miles to the lower end of Kent Island, generally known as "Bloody Point". Along the western shore of the Chesapeake, oyster mortality was observed from the same uppermost limits of oyster growth as far south as Herring Bay. Oyster beds in the Bay proper are more seriously affected than those in the tributaries, it is reported.

Mr. James said that observations by State and Federal biologists disclosed that the salinity of the water in the upper bay has been only one-half to one-third of normal during the past year, and that this unfavorable condition is believed to be responsible for the heavy mortality of oysters in the upper part of the Bay. Daily records made at Solomons Island show that from July of last year to the present time, salinities have remained at the lowest level reached in the past nine years.

These unfavorable conditions, aggravated by heavy local rains last July and August, prevented the normal recovery of oysters after last summer's spawning season and also interfered with their feeding, Mr. James explained. As a result, oysters in these upper Bay areas were in poor condition last fall and were unable to withstand continued exposure to low salt concentrations.

Oysters in the vicinity of Poplar Island and in other places farther south apparently have not been injured and, judging from reports coming in from the Crisfield area, are in very good condition in the latter section, Mr. James said.

State and Federal experts carefully explored the possibility that the present mortality might be caused by attacks of natural enemies of the oyster, by some organism associated with the oysters, or by a change in their environment other than lowered salinity. However, no evidence was found to support any of these possibilities, Mr. James said.

Mortality was found to be equally heavy on natural oyster bars and on State planted beds, indicating that there was no association with planting and other oyster cultural operations.

Experts of the Fish and Wildlife Service said that the present mortality of oysters is not an unusual phenomenon, high death rates among the oysters of the upper Chesapeake having occurred repeatedly during the past 38 years -- in 1908, 1916, 1928, 1936, and 1943. In each instance, high mortality coincided with an abnormally high run-off of the Susquehanna River and low salinity of the Bay water.

Mr. James said that conditions may improve in the near future as a result of the increase in water salinity which has occurred during the past two weeks, at a season when the salinity normally drops. Unless the run-off of the river suddenly rises, normal conditions should soon be restored, he said.

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