

Bluffton shellfisherman pushes changes on how beds are monitored

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A local harvester suggested a change to the state's requirements for shellfishing because a recent annual report keeps him from working a four-mile stretch of the May River.

Larry Toomer, the proprietor of Bluffton Oyster Co., told the May River Waterbody Management Plan Implementation Committee on Thursday that fecal coliform levels for the closed area were within acceptable ranges for eight of the 10 months measurements were taken in 2009, which could mean the oysters are safe to eat.

The S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control monitors water quality by taking samples each month from stations near each of the river's shellfishing areas. For the harvesting areas to remain open, pollutants in the water nearby must be below state limits nine out of every 10 months.

Samples have been taken at three new stations along the four-mile stretch during the past 12 months, and Bluffton compliance engineer John Carmack said more than two miles could be reopened if the results hold. However, that can't happen for another two years because the state requires three years worth of data to classify shellfish waters.

DHEC grades shellfishing areas based on three years of data compiled from monthly tests of water samples. Because of elevated fecal coliform levels, shellfishing in the four-mile stretch last year was "conditionally approved," which meant Toomer could harvest from the area unless rainfall exceeded 1.1 inches or the monthly levels exceeded state limits.

Toomer said harvesting areas should be opened or closed based on tests of the oyster meat, not the water. DHEC conducts such tests whenever shellfish from a particular area are believed to have caused illness, and Toomer contends such results are a better barometer of whether oysters are fit for consumption. He said by plotting the results of meat testing, state officials might be able to track pollution back to its source.

Toomer also offered to help with the testing.

"Whatever they want to do I will go ahead and do it, free of charge," he said.

DHEC spokesman Jim Beasley defended the state's methods.

"Those standards are nationally accepted," he said. "We feel that we are doing the best that we can with the resources that we have."

Committee member Jimmy McIntire said the politics that would be involved make it "folly" to try to change the DHEC standards. Other committee members were more open to the idea of meat testing.