

Isle oyster businesses took big hit from Ike

Storm surge damage reduced fisheries' gross revenues 70%

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Alejandro Muniz culls oysters aboard Jeri's Seafood oyster boat Miss Britney on a reef in Galveston's East Bay.

When sediment carried by Hurricane Ike's storm surge smothered more than 60 percent of Galveston Bay's oysters with silt, it choked one of the most productive and economically valuable commercial oyster fisheries in the nation.

Before the storm, Galveston Bay produced more oysters than any other single water body in the U.S.

Annual gross revenues generated by Galveston Bay's oyster-dependent businesses — oyster harvesters, processors, shippers — in the year since the storm were down more than 75 percent — from \$30.1 million to just \$6.9 million — from the 12-month period prior to the hurricane, according to a report by Texas A&M University's Texas AgriLife Extension Service/Sea Grant Extension Program.

Texas ranks behind only Louisiana in commercial oyster harvest, and Galveston Bay is the state's largest producer of the thick-shelled mollusks. From 1981 through 2007, Galveston Bay produced almost 80 percent of the oysters harvested from Texas water.

In 2007, Galveston Bay's reefs produced an estimated 2.77 million pounds of oyster meat for the commercial market — almost six times the oyster meat produced in 2007 by Chesapeake Bay, long the nation's top oyster-producing estuary until overfishing, disease and hydrological changes triggered the fishery's collapse over the past 20 years.

A two-pronged assault

Ike hit Galveston Bay's commercial oyster industry from above and below. The storm smothered oyster reefs below the bay's surface and wrecked oyster boats, docks, processing facilities and other infrastructure above it.

As with the 25,000-plus acres of publicly owned oyster reefs in the bay, its 2,700 acres of private reefs held by the commercial oyster industry under lease agreements with the state suffered severely from the storm. The A&M study indicates commercial leaseholders reported about 67 percent of the oysters on the private leases were lost.

Pre-Ike value of the oysters on the private leases was estimated to be \$19.4 million. About \$10.1 million in oysters were killed by siltation and another \$3 million worth was carried away by the storm's surge or classed as "missing."

Leaseholders estimated it would cost them \$18.6 million to rebuild and rehabilitate leased oyster reefs smothered or ripped apart by the storm.

The storm triggered a temporary closure of the bay to all commercial oyster harvest as state health officials worried about contamination of the filter-feeding shellfish from the soup of chemical and biological pollutants loosed by Ike.

Commercial oyster fishermen reported harvesting 654,000 pounds of oyster meat from Galveston Bay during November 2007. This past November, they took just 173,000 pounds.

The commercial oyster fishery also had to deal with a multimillion-dollar blow to its infrastructure. Of the 79 vessels owned by the Galveston Bay oyster businesses surveyed by Texas A&M, only four escaped storm damage.

Forty-three of the boats saw minor damage, while 26 suffered "substantial" damage and six were lost or destroyed.

Oyster fishermen estimated cost of repairing or replacing the fleet's Ike-caused damage at \$1.6 million. Combined cost of damage to the bay's oyster industry — losses of oysters on private leases, damage to vessels, docks, and other equipment — is estimated at \$38 million.

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