

Red knot protection could take toll on oyster industry, beach replenishment

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MIDDLE TOWNSHIP — A recent decision by the federal government to list a migratory shorebird as a threatened species could have implications beyond the Delaware Bay beaches where the birds come each spring to feed on horseshoe crab eggs.

The listing could impact things such as beach-replenishment projects and the growing oyster-farming industry along the bay, federal officials say.

The listing of the red knot, a small, robin-sized shorebird, became effective Jan. 12. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is initially focusing its bird-protection efforts on the bay, but later efforts could focus on the ocean coast, which could affect replenishment projects.

Red knots stop at the bay during a period of about six weeks centered on the highest May tides as they head to Arctic nesting grounds to breed. The long-distant migrant uses the ocean side more on a return flight to wintering grounds in South America, arriving sporadically from late July into early November.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which is charged with enforcing red knot protections under the Endangered Species Act, remains in a “consultation phase” with the oyster industry. The process will eventually become more formal and lead to permits that come with conditions.

The red knot’s migration to the Arctic relies on eating horseshoe-crab eggs deposited along the bay coast. Oyster farmers use the same tidal flats along those beaches.

Wendy Walsh, a biologist with the Fish and Wildlife Service office in Pleasantville, said the review centers on several concerns.

“The first one is disturbance. The growers say they can’t take off the month of May. They need to do maintenance. The secondary concern is to make sure gear does not block the horseshoe crabs from getting to the beach to spawn,” Walsh said.

While wild oyster harvesting began locally in the 1730s, using the tidal flats to grow them, a French method known as “rack-and-bag” is relatively new. The process involves putting the bivalves in steel cages where they filter out food from tidal waters and grow to market size. Workers have to lift the racks periodically to cull and clean the shellfish. Mud worms and other parasites must be washed off regularly, or the oysters die.

It is a small but growing industry. The Port of Cape May firm Atlantic Capes Fisheries began it almost two decades ago, growing a three-inch oyster marketed under the name Cape May Salts that now enjoys national distribution, but other growers have leased grounds from the state. There are proposals to expand the territory.

“There are nine growers on the Delaware Bay, though one is not active, and they grow 1.5 million oysters a year,” said Lisa Calvo, aquaculture program coordinator with New Jersey Sea Grant at Rutgers University.

Elected officials have embraced the new industry along the job-starved bayshore region, though the red knot migration also adds to the local economy by drawing birdwatchers from all over the world.

Can they coexist? Calvo hopes something can be worked out, though she said having the growers pull all their gear out of the water for six weeks is not an option. She said the government would not make farmers on land pull their

beans or corn out of the fields.

“The market would be gone after those six weeks. The profit margin in this industry is not that great right now. It’s a very young industry,” Calvo said.

There has been talk of elevating the racks so horseshoe crabs can go under them, limiting maintenance during the key period, moving them to deeper water for six weeks, limiting the area of tidal flats covered or creating pathways through the racks. Everything is on the table at this point.

“We’re kind of back-and-forth exchanging information with the growers,” Walsh said.

The growing areas now, Walsh noted, are just south of the beaches with the highest red knot densities, but the growers want to expand to the north.

Larry Niles of the Conserve Wildlife Foundation of New Jersey does not want expansion into red knot areas. Niles, who has made it his life’s work to save the species, is also concerned about impact where the growers currently operate. He notes they use power washers to clean the cages and ride ATVs on the beaches the red knots rely on for food. He questions whether crabs can even get to the beach to lay their eggs and whether they can then return back to the water.

Niles suggests going to deeper water where there would be no impact or moving the operation south to the Villas and Town Bank areas, which are not used heavily by crabs or red knots.

“Why choose the area of greatest conflict? Why not choose the area of the least conflict?” Niles asked.

Conserve Wildlife is one of the groups helping restore bay beaches for horseshoe crabs, which also benefits area homeowners, but he said he supports the small local fishermen and wants them to have a sustainable business.

“You can’t have good conservation in a place where people can’t make a living,” Niles said.

Walsh said the Fish and Wildlife Service is working with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers on how to reduce the impact on red knots during beachfill projects on the ocean side. Such projects are already limited during the nesting season for the federally endangered piping plover.

“Our recommendation is to monitor the red knots. We don’t have enough data to recommend a seasonal resolution,” Walsh said.

Calvo argues more data needs to be collected before imposing restrictions on the bay side. She said the oyster operations may be benefitting the environment by increasing biodiversity and cleaning the water. She complained there were no public hearings on the listing in New Jersey.

“Is there any impact? I don’t think we really know that,” Calvo said.

Niles rejects the idea of waiting while impacts are studied. He mentioned previous cases where this was done and by the time impacts were known the resource was nearly wiped out.

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