

# KATE WREAKS HAVOC ON OYSTER INDUSTRY

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**Written By Soneni Bryant**

Even as Hurricane Kate seriously endangered Apalachicola's oyster industry Thursday, it kept Tallahassee's restaurant, hotel and grocery-store businesses thriving.

Apalachicola Bay's bountiful new crop of oysters were too fragile to survive any storm surge, officials said. A strong tidal current could have possibly wiped them out.

The loss could set back, for six months, an oyster industry already crippled by September's Hurricane Elena, said David Heil of the state Department of Natural Resources. And there is no guarantee that next spring's crop will be as plentiful, he added.

"There are billions and billions of tiny oysters out there. Their shells are very fragile. If we get a good storm surge we could lose that crop," Heil said. "It doesn't need a direct hit to do considerable damage."

Biologists and researchers have said that since Elena, oyster spat, or larvae, have been forming and reproducing in Apalachicola Bay at records levels this fall.

The \$6.5-million industry was banking on a bumper crop next spring that could nearly double the value of the state's largest oyster-producing resource. Apalachicola Bay produces about 10 percent of the nation's oysters and 90 percent of all oysters sold in Florida.

Oyster dealers and fishermen said they cannot endure another season without oysters. The bay has been closed to commercial harvesting since September when Elena wrecked the lucrative winter oyster bars.

It was scheduled to remain closed until the crop could replenish itself, state officials said. The bay was expected to be closed the entire winter season and it was not definite when it would be open next spring.

After Kate, the reopening of Apalachicola Bay is more uncertain, officials said. More studies will be conducted after the storm, Heil said.

Meanwhile, hundreds of oystermen are out of work and fishing businesses are suffering.

“This could hurt us pretty bad,” said Bill Helson, owner of Posey’s, a popular St Marks oyster bar. “This is bad publicity for us. People are already beginning to think that our oysters are no good or there aren’t any here at all.

“My business was off quite a bit from the last storm. And here it is back again,” said Helson.

Meanwhile, Tallahassee’s restaurants, hotels and grocery stores were bustling with evacuees from coastal communities that took refuge in the city.

Publix stores expected sales to increase at least 60 percent Thursday. Store manager David Berkes, of Publix on North Monroe Street, confirmed that during Hurricane Elena, some Publix stores grossed at least \$100,000 or more in sales in one day. He estimated Publix stores would nearly gross that amount this storm.

Absent, however, was the panic buying that went on before Elena was expected to hit, Berkes said.

“It’s an excellent business day. But I’m not selling as many batteries and things I sold during the last storm. Maybe they over-prepared the last time,” Berkes said.

At Quincy’s restaurants in Tallahassee, business was booming even during the off hours, said Mike McMahon, general manager of Quincy’s on Magnolia Drive. Restaurants on Monroe Street and on Timberlane Road reported an increase of sales, he said..

“The hotels are filling up and that is really helping the restaurants around town,” McMahon said.

All 180 rooms at the Days Inn on Apalachee Parkway were filled Wednesday night when residents in coastal communities were ordered to evacuate, said a hotel manager. Most people checked in late that night, she said.

Hotels are filling up with residents mostly from Crawfordville, Eastpoint, Carrabelle, Port St Joe and Panama City, managers said.