

SURVEY: OYSTERS MADE IT THROUGH KATE

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Written By Soneni Bryant

All is not lost in Apalachicola Bay.

Recent surveys conducted by state biologists show a large portion of the bountiful new Apalachicola oyster crop survived Hurricane Kate. One official said the bay might be open for oystering as early as spring.

“Divers reported to us (Wednesday) that the young oysters that were established on the reefs are doing well,” said John Schneider, regulations chief for the Department of Natural Resources. “Some debris was redistributed, but there was no damage to any reefs or to the young oysters. It looks good.”

Apparently man-made reefs, put down after Hurricane Elena devastated the bay in September, were protected by a higher tide during last week’s storm, Schneider said.

Because there was more water in the bay, Kate had less of a scouring effect on the reefs, he said.

The divers reported that most of the crop had reached 1 inch in diameter” regulation size for commercial oysters is 3 inches.

But the bay will remain closed to oyster harvesting until the oysters are large enough for commercial use and the supply is sufficient to sustain Apalachicola Bay’s fishing industry. That could be early spring or next summer, according to Schneider.

Apalachicola Bay produces 10 percent of the nation’s oysters and 90 percent of Florida’s.

After Elena, oyster reefs in East Hole, one of the more productive oyster beds, were virtually depleted. Reefs in Cat Point east of the St. George Island Causeway, also a major spawning ground, were ruined in the Labor Day storm.

In an effort to restore the reefs, the Department of Natural Resources was paying up to \$35,000 a week to have about 200 fisherman plant oyster shells, which oyster larvae attach to. That program ended recently when the money ran out.

“When we have to build new reefs, it usually takes about 18 to 24 months before they are productive,” said Schneider. But the nutrient-rich bay has allowed the oysters to recover at a record rate.

If the rapid growth continues, state officials and industry representatives are banking on the bay reopening this spring.