

Issue

Water quality data collected by NSW oyster farmers, and subsequent efforts to protect waterways, is at stake with a cut in State Government funds.

Background

Oyster farmers are becoming increasingly frustrated by cost recovery moves for the public beneficial NSW Shellfish Program (NSW SP) while data sharing expectations remain.

Since 1997, oyster farmers have collected 68,000 water quality tests under the NSW Food Authority's internationally accepted NSW SP. Farmers take 8,000 tests each year for algal biotoxins and faecal coliforms after identifying pollution sources in public waterways.

Between 2002-03 and 2004-05 the NSW Government contributed an average of \$0.9 million/year to the NSW SP and the NSW shellfish industry an average of \$2.3 million. Of the \$0.9 million requested through Minister Macdonald for 2005-06, the NSW Government contributed \$0.4 million, leaving the \$38 million industry with \$2.8 million out of pocket.

The industry testifies that the NSW SP has been delivering real results in both public and environmental health in the absence of routine monitoring programs in coastal estuaries. The oyster industry has not only been testing for water quality but has reported problems and been involved in remediation.

Examples of pollution and health alert, and remediation;

1. sanitary restoration of Wallis Lake from its February 1997 Hepatitis A lows to its current status averaging 14 faecal coliform units/100 ml,
2. identification and sterol typing of faecal contamination in Tilligerry Creek that exceeded safe fishing and boating standards in 2005,
3. location of submerged and leaking sewage lines (Tweed and Camden Haven Rivers),
4. identification of high levels potentially toxic algae that, in 2003, caused a widespread closure to recreational and commercial fishing in many South Coast locations.

The Healthy Rivers Commission (2003) endorsed the industry's environmental indicator status when it stated that *"measures to safeguard river health to allow for oyster cultivation for human consumption will also provide river health for aquatic ecosystem protection and primary contact recreation, both typical objectives for estuarine waters"*. As a cultivator of an indicator species, the oyster industry's remediation activities are not simply limited to NSW SP findings but extend focus to other ecosystem stress indicators such as pH and turbidity.

It is recognised that sampling programs are designed around different objectives and this can frustrate data sharing efforts between programs. However, in the relative absence of baseline and routinely collected data along the coastline, the NSW SP data should be recognised for its environmental value.

The Association is requesting

1. Recognition of the NSW Shellfish Program findings, as it delivers "on the ground" results in estuarine protection and remediation;
2. Funding of \$1.5 million for 2006-07 and agreement on a future equitable funding arrangement, via a review conducted by NSW Treasury, to enable data sharing.