

# STATE CHAMPIONS

The Essex Trojans shut out their opponent during the state final last Saturday

A7



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Oysters ride a conveyor belt into a truck used for distribution. (Photo by Alex J. Berkman)

## State program helping harvest

By Nathaniel Cline

Replenishing oysters in the waters flowing to the Chesapeake Bay has paid off for waterman and oyster buyers.

Since Dec. 1, the Virginia Marine Resources Commission (VMRC) has been monitoring the number of bushels collected by watermen.

According to Chairman James A. Wesson, of the department of conservation and replenishment, the VMRC measure has been an ongoing project since the baby oysters were relocated in 2007.

Wesson said in order to determine the cost effectiveness of harvesting oysters, VMRC representatives hauled the baby oysters from the Great Wicomico in Reedville to six less salinated waters including the Rappahannock, Nomini, Yeocomico and Coan Rivers.

"If we had left them in high salinity waters, the diseases would have caused them to not reach market size," said Wesson.

The size of the oysters was a surprise to buyer Jimmy Burton Jr. from the Bevans Oyster Company based in Kinsale.

"The results they got from their efforts is phenomenal," said Burton. "This is a way oysters used to grow naturally here and we didn't have to do anything."

Burton said he believes the change of venue for the oysters has also changed the expected growth time and has increased oyster size by a quarter of inch in size.

"Normally the big ones grow slower, but they are growing fast," Burton said. "All the conditions are right, the water quality is right, the amount of food they get is right and the disease is not bothering them. Everything that could be going for them is working."

The outcome of VMRC's efforts, it has also given for watermen some work for the holidays.

According to Burton, Bevans Oyster Company

began with seven or eight watermen on the roster. They now have at least 50.

State Senator Richard Stuart was excited about the news and hopes the state will continue its efforts.

"These projects in the Machodoc Creek and Nomini River are real success stories," said Stuart. "We've got a great area here to grow oysters and we need to make sure we bring attention to it so we can help get the money to plant that seed and keep these watermen working." During the harvest last

week, he Hicks brothers, of Gloucester, already pulled in a bushel out of the Nomini River.

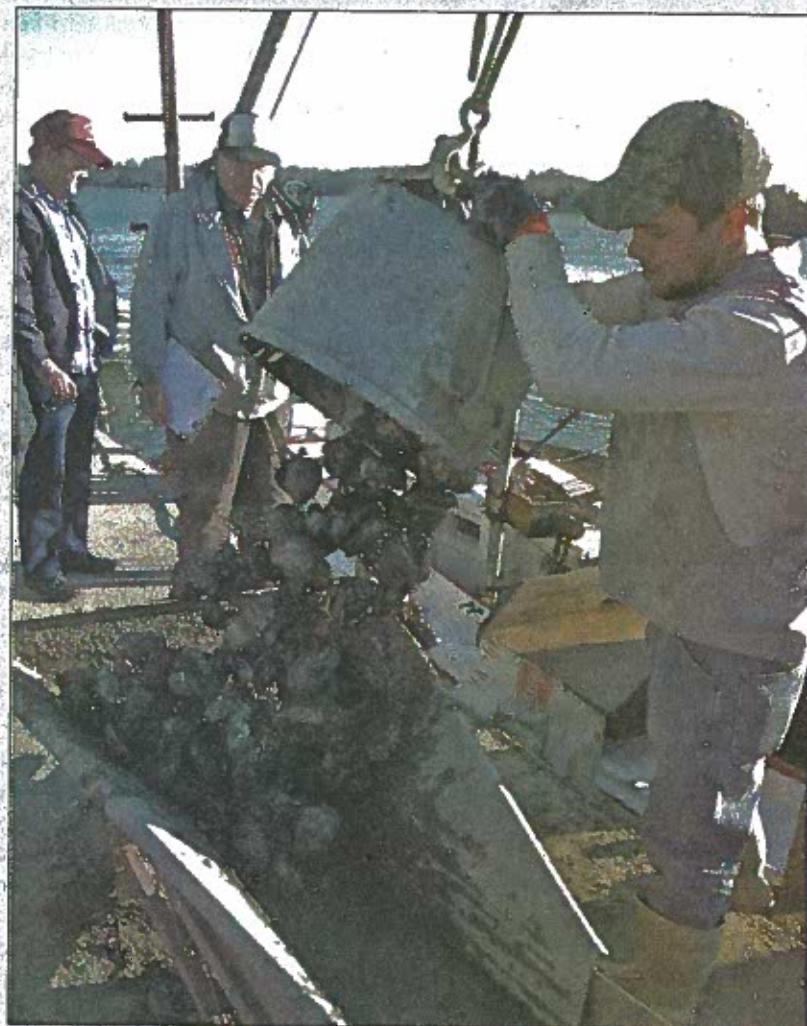
"It really came in at a good time, especially [during] with the Christmas time, people need the extra money and it helps out a lot," said William Hicks. "The rest of the oyster season really hasn't

been that great, but a little place like this really helps out. You get a good price for them and you catch a good day's work."

William and brother Terry Hicks agree that VMRC needs to continue its project.

"It seems like it's working and needs to keep going for the watermen because everybody is making a decent day's work," said Terry Hicks. "The program they have going and the way the oysters are growing, it's just a beautiful catch for everybody."

## A harvest to remember



Derek Richards, 24, of Westmoreland County, dumps a fresh catch of oysters onto a Bevans Oyster Co. conveyor belt. The oysters are part of a new program implemented by the Virginia Marine Resources Commission to revitalize the local oyster population. See full story on page A12.

(Photo by Alex J. Berkman)

"We really appreciate them for doing that, they deserve a pat on the back," William said.

William Hicks, waterman for 30 years.

Watermen came from around the region including Dustin Westman from Northumberland.

"The harvest has been real good, if they plant stuff, things will move," said Westman.

He laughed when asked about the significance of the harvest.

"You got to eat," he said, smiling. "I'm glad to see we have something to work and I hope they continue to plant."

The wave of oyster harvesting has kept Doug Jenkins Sr., a 60-year waterman veteran, from Westmoreland County out of the loop.

"It hasn't been a good catch like this in Nomini for a long time," said Jenkins. "It's something

that the watermen have wanted for a long time."

Watermen and companies rely heavily on the oysters as Margaret Bevans, of Bevans Oyster Company in Kinsale, described.

"It couldn't happen at a better time during the holidays and the oysters are absolutely beautiful," said Bevans. "They are doing a great job planting the oysters and they have been growing. I hope the state plants again."

He added that department representatives expect to be completed by early January and will then analyze the results and determine the cost effectiveness.

The deadline for watermen to be added to the harvesting list closed in November.

To learn more about the VMRC program, visit [www.mrc.state.va.us/replenishment.shtm](http://www.mrc.state.va.us/replenishment.shtm)