

Oysters: Corps are expected to do little new restoration work next year

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Army Criminal Investigation Command has said.

Brian Rheinhardt, the new project manager for native oyster recovery at the Norfolk district, said this week that "there may be" some artificial oyster reefs built in the Lynnhaven next year, but he was not sure.

It seems unlikely that those reefs, even if constructed, could be stocked with baby oysters next year, Rheinhardt said. The sole contractor hired by the corps to raise "seed" oysters in Virginia remains behind schedule in growing enough babies for reefs in the Great Wicomico River — a project near the Virginia-Maryland line that was expected to be completed last year.

The corps had hoped to "carpet-bomb" three man-made reefs in the Great Wicomico with 15 million oysters as part of a strategy designed to overwhelm diseases that have ravaged Bay stocks and to spark a population rebound there.

So far, though, about 6 million oysters have been set piecemeal on the reefs, Rheinhardt said, and some have died because of low oxygen levels and red tides in the river this summer. The contractor, York River Yacht Haven, in Gloucester County, missed its October and December deadlines to complete the seeding.

Concerned about the slow pace, Rheinhardt and a team of experts toured the York River facility this week and decided

and Atmospheric Administration. Asked what the institute will do with the money, Paula Jasinski, the administration's Chesapeake Bay office director in Virginia, said she has requested a meeting next week to find out.

"We have some of the same questions you're asking," Jasinski said.

She explained that Congress has earmarked \$2 million for the institute in each of the past three years, to coincide with corps initiatives in the Great Wicomico River and elsewhere. But with the corps expected to pursue little or no new restoration work in 2006, "it's less clear what the money will be used for," Jasinski said.

Laurie Sorabella, executive director of Lynnhaven River 2007, an environmental group trying to clean up the Virginia Beach waterway, said she is not frustrated by all the federal entanglements, which have effectively delayed action on the river for two years.

"Whether they get to us in 2006 or 2007 or 2008, we'd be excited for them to do some oyster restoration work on our river," Sorabella said.

She said local efforts will continue. The city of Virginia Beach and hundreds of volunteers are growing native oysters and spreading them on artificial reefs.

"Whenever they get to us is fine," Sorabella said.

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Restoration of Va. oyster population moves slowly

THE SETBACKS

Congress last week approved just more than \$1 million for the Army Corps of Engineers for oyster restoration work in 2006 in Virginia's portion of the



Chesapeake Bay, that's the smallest allocation since 2003. Also, the contractor hired by the corps to raise "seed" oysters in Virginia remains behind schedule.

BY SCOTT HARPER
THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

Federal efforts at restoring native oysters in Virginia's waters — and the Lynnhaven River, in particular — will be slowed or stalled next year by shortages of baby oysters and limited federal funding.

Congress last week approved just more than \$1 million for the Army Corps of Engineers in Norfolk to pursue oyster restoration work in 2006 in Virginia's portion of the Chesapeake Bay. That's the smallest allocation since 2003 and will pay mostly for the corps to complete a long-term master plan of future oyster projects, officials said.

Like the Bay, the Lynnhaven River in Virginia Beach has seen its native oyster populations plummet in recent decades because of pollution, disease and lost habitat. The Lynnhaven was supposed to be the focus of corps action this year, but that did not happen because of legal tangles, personnel problems and internal scientific debate about how best to proceed.

In late summer, the corps's oyster program became the subject of a criminal investigation by Army special agents. The ongoing inquiry is directed at questionable spending and contracting by the Norfolk district of the corps, a spokesman for the

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