

Oyster area closed after 14 report illness

By Amy Wold

Advocate staff writer

After 14 people reported stomach viruses after eating Louisiana oysters at a New Orleans restaurant last month, the state Department of Health and Hospitals has closed the Gulf Coast area where the oysters were harvested.

State Health Officer Dr. Jimmy Guidry said Tuesday he would not name the restaurant because the incident was a oyster harvest area problem, not a restaurant problem.

Harvest tags showed the oysters consumed at the restaurant came from the southern portion of the harvesting area in Terrebonne Parish, according to DHH.

Guidry said 1,141 sacks of oysters came from the now-closed harvesting area since April 26, with 80 sacks going to the New Orleans area and 1,061 sacks going to Maryland, Texas and Georgia. No oysters from that area and that period were sold in Baton Rouge, he said.

So far, there have been no reports of illness from other states where the oysters were sold, Guidry said.

Although sometimes harvesting area closures can be due to heavy rainfall washing fecal material into oyster beds, Guidry said this incident was too localized to be caused by runoff.

Instead, the incident indicates that someone was fishing in an area and put sewage overboard thinking it wasn't a big deal, but the sewage got into the oyster bed, he said.

The DHH announcement also included a recall of all oysters harvested from the area since April 26, meaning shucked, frozen, breaded, post-harvest-processed and raw oysters, according to a news release.

The 14 people who reported becoming ill with a norovirus ate at the New Orleans restaurant on April 28 or April 29, according to DHH. Of those people, no one was hospitalized, according to DHH.

The symptoms that accompany this "stomach flu" usually start about a day or two after eating or drinking something carrying the virus.

Symptoms include nausea, vomiting, diarrhea and stomach cramping, and sometimes people have a low-grade fever, chills, headache, muscle ache and fatigue, according to DHH.

Although cooking kills the virus, people have gotten sick after eating undercooked oysters from a contaminated area, according to DHH.

Louisiana oyster Norovirus

The harvesting area closure announced Tuesday is expected to last about 21 days

John Tesvich, chairman of the Louisiana Oyster Task Force, said typically the norovirus seems to appear when the water is cooler in the winter months. "It's a little unusual to have it happen at this time of the year," he said.

The closure of one area of the coast should not have much effect on the supply of oysters in the state, Tesvich said.

Although areas north of the area closed Tuesday also are closed, that's likely because the areas typically are closed on a seasonal basis because of water flow from the Atchafalaya River, he said.

"The river water does not meet the cleanliness levels for fecal contamination (for oyster harvest)," Tesvich said. So when there are heavy rains or high river flows, those areas are closed as a precaution, he said.

"When the river gets high, the pollution goes farther out," Tesvich said.

Mike Voisin, of the Louisiana Oyster Task Force in Terrebonne Parish, said the closed area is small and there has been limited harvest out of it this year in part because of large amounts of fresh water that flowed over it during last year's flood and damaged oysters.

"From a public health perspective, we use a safety net of testing," Voisin said. "But every once in a while you get a break in the net and that appears what happened here."

Anyone who got ill and thinks it might be from oysters harvested since April 26 can call (800) 256-2748, Guidry said.

Copyright © 2011, Capital City Press LLC • 7290 Bluebonnet Blvd., Baton Rouge, LA 70810 • All Rights Reserved