



Through rain, silt and oyster spat

Seasonal oyster crews serve essential role

LUKE WHITTAKER
Chinook Observer

NAHCOTTA — A dull hum echoed from a silhouette on the distant tide flats before sunrise on a late-May morning in Nahcotta.

As the sun rose, dozens of shellfish farm workers emerged from the mist, each dressed in rubber boots and bibs as they toiled in a driving rain at low tide to help cultivate a future crop of Willapa Bay oysters.

The workers, a mix of full-time oyster farmers and seasonal seed crew, were employed by Pacific Seafood to fulfill an essential step in maintaining Willapa Bay's aquaculture abundance, which overall accounts for about a quarter of the U.S. total.

The workers were busy gathering mesh cultch bags, each filled with shells holding oyster larvae, also known as spat.

Workers passed the bags of baby oysters hand-to-hand with the last handler cutting the bag open and dropping the young oysters onto a conveyor belt that carried the tiny mollusks onto an awaiting barge.

See Oysters, Page B4



TOP: Shellfish farmer Oscar Martinez moves a basket into place before he begins filling it with oyster cultch on a sodden Monday, May 24 in Nahcotta.

LEFT: Shellfish farming is arduous work often in adverse conditions, but brings a special satisfaction. "I love it," said Cesar Rodriguez, a shellfish farmer for the past seven years.

BELOW: Dante Negrete prepares to break open a cultch bag into a basket on the tideflats east of Nahcotta on a rainy May morning.

PHOTOS BY LUKE WHITTAKER



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Shellfish farmers are silhouetted against Willapa Bay.





Shellfish farmer Cesar Rodriguez, right, empties a bag of oyster cultch onto a conveyor belt.

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A shellfish farmer carries away empty cultch bags.

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Shellfish farmers empty cultch bags into baskets.

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Workers passed the bags of baby oysters hand-to-hand with the last handler cutting the bag open and dropping the young oysters onto a conveyor belt that carried the mollusks to an awaiting barge.

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Shellfish farmer David Ross, center, empties bags of oyster cultch in Nahcotta.

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A shellfish farmer prepares to empty bags of cultch into a basket.

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Shellfish farmer Oscar Martinez drops an oyster cultch bag into a basket in Nahcotta.

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A worker wipes their face between gathering bags of oysters on the tideflats east of Nahcotta.

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Oysters: Grow and mature over about two years into dense clusters

Continued from Page B1

From there, the oysters are taken to ideal growing spots in Willapa Bay and spread along the bottom, areas conducive to growing a "richer and fatter" seed oyster. The oysters grow and mature over about two years into dense clusters before being separated for final fattening and harvest.

Pacific Seafood, headquartered in Clackamas, Oregon, and a dominant force in the Pacific Northwest fish and shellfish industry, acquired Coast Seafoods Company of South Bend in 2011, thus gaining a significant foothold on Willapa Bay.



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LEFT: The workers were busy gathering mesh cultch bags, pictured. Each cultch bag is filled with shells holding oyster larvae, or spat. ABOVE: A worker holds a shell with oyster larvae, called spat, attached. The little oysters will grow to a harvestable size over the course of about two years.

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