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Oyster Rafts Float Ashore

By JACK SHEA

Five workers from the Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head (Aquinnah) yesterday began cleaning up Menemsha Pond and its waterfront, picking up stray oyster breeding bags owned by the tribe, according to Tobias Vanderhoop, who this week began working as tribal administrator.



Complaints have begun to pour in about oyster bags on the loose in Aquinnah.

The black plastic bags, left untended since the tribe's oyster hatchery program on the pond reportedly shut down last fall, have washed up as far away as the Elizabeth Islands, Aquinnah selectman Camille Rose said, and were prompting complaints in Aquinnah.

Aquinnah conservation commission chairman Sarah Thulin said this week, "I live on Menemsha Pond and I've seen the oyster bags on the beach, and as the town conservation officer naturally I get complaints from others."

Tribal natural resource director Bret Stearns, who oversees the ongoing scallop hatchery program, said yesterday he also has heard complaints from people around town about the moribund oyster hatchery's stray bags. "We try to deal with them as they arise but the reality is that there has been significantly less staff," he said.

Mr. Vanderhoop said: "We have people out working on it now. We care about the pond.

"Our expectation is that we should be cleaned up within a few weeks." He said the cleanup involves collection of oyster bags and any other debris.

Launched in 2003, the tribe's hatchery for several years harvested several million oysters, hardshell clams and scallops. The tribe put special emphasis on

its oyster business, creating a brand name, Tomahawk Oysters, which were in demand by restaurants from the Vineyard to New York city.

The tribe has leased a total of five acres from the town of Aquinnah for its oyster hatchery project, including a site inside Menemsha Pond and a larger deep water site outside the pond, Mr. Stearns said.

Work on the tribe's oyster hatchery project and maintenance of several thousand oyster bags ceased last fall, said Aquinnah commercial oyster fisherman Roxanne Ackerman.

Mr. Stearns said by phone yesterday that no oyster hatchery employees work at the hatchery shed on the Aquinnah side of the pond. Mr. Stearns said he uses the shed for the tribe's ongoing scallop hatchery but he has not been involved in the oyster project.

The reason for suspension of the oyster business is unclear. Aquinnah shellfish constable Brian (Chip) Vanderhoop was off-Island yesterday and could not be reached for comment. Tribal chairman Cheryl Andrews-Maltais also could not be reached for comment.

Asked about the future of the oyster hatchery, Mr. Vanderhoop said: "First, we have to inventory what we've got, get a handle on that and then develop a plan of action."

Aquinnah selectman Spencer Booker confirmed that the oyster operation had been suspended but had little more information to offer. "There appears to be a definite level of inactivity going on and that the tribe is in process of reorganizing their shellfish hatchery," he said.

Ms. Ackerman said she hopes the tribe gets back in the oyster business. "The last couple of weeks, I've noticed a lot more activity at the hatchery," she said. "People organizing and cleaning the equipment."

Ms. Ackerman, the former town librarian, worked for the tribal oyster project for four years before taking her own lease on 2.5 acres in Menemsha Pond. She has been oystering on her own for two years. "I have picked up their bags in my site and put them back on the beach," she said, adding:

"I can tell you that plenty of oysters survived. The tribe has plenty of oysters, and I think they are reorganizing their plan." She said the tribal shellfish hatchery is a state-of-the-art facility. "I believe their scallop hatchery has been very successful but possibly a distraction from the oyster business," she said.

Meanwhile, with 800 bags of her own to tend, she said she is being careful not to add to the problem. "I'm taking care of my bags, flipping them, making sure lines

are attached,” she said.

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