



GOLD RUSH

in Hempstead Harbor

Flotilla of fishermen takes over harbor after 2,500 acres are reopened for shellfishing

BY PAUL LAROCCO
paul.larocco@newsday.com

The diggers who descended on Hempstead Harbor last week for the waters' first shellfishing in more than 40 years resembled, in a way, the prospectors of the Wild West: eager, and entering the unknown.

"When you get a new area that hasn't been open for years, it's like the Gold Rush," said Bill Fetzer, a long-time commercial clammer from Bayville. "You've got to go look around."

Fishermen launched boats from all sides of the harbor during the first days of harvesting. Some drove their vessels from Huntington Bay while others even flew in

from Florida, bay constables said.

The response matched the significance officials placed on the reopening of 2,500 acres of the outer harbor, after decades of dealing with sewage, sandmining and heavy industry pollution. Inner-harbor areas to the south, and the immediately adjacent portion of the Long Island Sound, to the north, re-

main closed.

Over the past five years, New York's Department of Environmental Conservation conducted repeated testing, working with municipalities surrounding the harbor and advocates such as the Hempstead Harbor Protection Committee. Water samples, officials said, show that fecal bacteria levels now meet stringent state and federal standards for open shellfishing.

Hard clam samples show no risk of metal, dioxin, furan, PCB, pesticide or radioactive exposure, the state said.

"It's gratifying," said Will-

Clam fishermen dig in the harbor over the weekend after a shellfishing ban was lifted.



iam Hastback, acting shellfisheries head for the DEC bureau of marine resources. "There was a lot of work and a lot of effort that went into this."

Leading up to June 1, Hastback took numerous calls from harvesters wondering just what the waters would hold. "Commercial guys say it's probably going to be filled with larger clams of lower-market value," he said last week.

Fetzer was on a boat with another clammer at 6:30 a.m. the first day. He confirmed the speculation.

"The 'Gold Rush' was not as good as I expected," he said. "But I'm thrilled that the state opened up the land. The economy's not good, and there are a lot of guys in areas that aren't productive."

At Tappen Beach & Marina in Glenwood Landing, observers saw an immediate impact.

On a normal Wednesday, two boat trailers may dot the large parking lot, said Jim Martin, a Glen Cove retiree who spends mornings at the facility. On June 1, there were more than a dozen.

"I guess you can say everybody's here," said Martin, an

ex-Sea Cliff fire chief.

Mike Salentino, Glen Cove's longtime harbormaster, expects large crowds of clammers to stick around for at least a few weeks. His staff, along with Oyster Bay and North Hempstead Town bay constables and Nassau County and DEC marine police, will be busy checking licenses.

"Everybody's flooding it now, but it'll go back to normal," he said. "You have to remember, this place has been closed a long time, and right now, it's one of the only games in town."

NEWSDAY PHOTO: J. CONRAD WILLIAMS JR.