

## **Shell blame: Lack of fresh water leads to oyster ban** ***Houston Chronicle - Editorial***

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For Gulf seafood lovers, this is a grim year. Red tide (the *Karenia brevis* algae) has killed roughly 3 million fish. And though it doesn't kill oysters, the algae's neurotoxins accumulate in their briny flesh and can poison anyone who eats them. Until further notice, harvesting shellfish off our coast is banned.

If that's grim news for seafood lovers, it's even grimmer for the small businesses (fishermen, oystermen, processors, restaurants, tourism) that depend on the Gulf's bounty. Like the oysters themselves, many oystermen have been struggling to survive.

The good news is that a hard rain could clear up this year's problem. It's not just our area's trees that are suffering during this drought; it's also Galveston Bay. Too little fresh water has flowed into it from rivers and bayous. That leaves the bay saltier than usual - which is how red tide likes it.

The bad news? Long-term, a too-salty bay is likely to become our new normal. And if it does, we can kiss our oysters goodbye - as well as the Bay's shrimp, fish and birds. Without as much freshwater, the Bay would stop being a superproductive estuary, jam-packed with life.

Somehow, though, devastating the Bay doesn't seem to bother the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality. Earlier this year, the TCEQ commissioners adopted rules that will allow fresh water flowing into the bay to be reduced, regularly, to a trickle as pitiful as this year's.

That's a disaster waiting to happen. As the state's population grows, without tougher limits on how much fresh water those future rights holders can draw, there's little incentive to conserve water, and not enough left for wildlife.

As more people use more water, the amount left to flow into the Bay will be puny - not enough to support the Bay's wild things. Every year will be like this awful drought, but without the hope that it'll end. The National Wildlife Federation estimates that in 50 years, the Bay will lose its ability to rebound.

We urge the TCEQ to reconsider its rules. We want our grandkids to enjoy the same Galveston Bay that we love - and to know the pure pleasure of slurping a Gulf oyster on the half shell.

<http://www.chron.com/opinion/editorials/article/Shell-blame-Lack-of-fresh-water-leads-to-oyster-2241799.php>