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Oysters given chance at life

Super molluscs bred to survive at Ballina

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THEY breed some tough oysters down Port Stephens way.

A handful might even survive the sad waters of the Richmond River at Ballina long enough to breed.

When it became apparent that the once-prolific native Sydney rock oyster could no longer live to maturity in the degraded Richmond, committed locals banded together.

Last September the Richmond River chapter of national angler conservation group OzFish Unlimited partnered with local business Richmond Oysters and NSW DPI to trial selectively bred Sydney rock oysters, which scientists hoped might be more resilient in local conditions.

The local commercial mullet crews funded the aquaculture gear and last October the “super oysters”

from the DPI’s Port Stephens Aquaculture Research Unit went into Mobbs Bay.

QX disease is caused by a parasite that becomes fatal to oysters only when these amazing molluscs suffer poor water quality over sustained periods.

Stormwater, wastewater and agricultural chemical and sediment runoff are all potential culprits. Acidity and rotting organics from drained swamps cause crashing pH and oxygen levels after the rains that are so much a part of local life.

Two QX-resistant strains of oysters are being monitored, along with a similar number of locally collected juvenile oysters as a control.

Spring and summer around Ballina were among the driest on record and all the oysters thrived until two minor rain events, according to Dr Matt Landos, of Future

Fisheries Veterinary Service and the OzFish member overseeing the project.

“Mortality began in early February across all selectively bred and local lines of oysters. Lab results showed QX disease was raging,” Dr Landos said.

“While we were seeing good growth consistent with food availability in the Richmond River, unfortunately we saw high mortality through the QX disease summer window.”

Then came the near-record April Fool Flood.

Dr Landos and his OzFish volunteers were unsure what would greet them when the waters of Mobbs Bay cleared.

“The most recent review since the flooding has the non-disease resistant family at 100% mortality, followed by mid disease-resistant at 68% and the most disease resistant at 63%,” he said.

OzFish Unlimited

chairman John Larsson said: “Ozfish has calculated that under normal healthy water conditions the rock walls in the extended Ballina Island area can support up to 4.5 million oysters – and they have in the past.

“Each oyster can easily filter three litres an hour, so that’s at least 216 Olympic

pools of river water filtered every day.

“If the DPI can come up with a disease-resistant oyster, this may help fill a gap until we can get on top of water quality issues to support wild oysters again.

“Our goal is to have unmodified oysters survive on the Richmond, as they have for thousands of years.

“This isn’t impossible. Many other coastal estuaries

plagued with QX disease were able to improve water quality and restore oysters through a combined community effort incorporating all levels of government and key stakeholders.”



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RESTOCKING: OzFish volunteers assess oyster mortality along the Porpoise Wall, Ballina.