

# NEWS RELEASE

MS Dept. of Marine Resources  
1141 Bayview Ave., Biloxi 39530



*FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE*

**16-74-MMS**  
**Nov. 1, 2016**

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## ***Biloxi Bay oyster reefs open for first time in 54 years***

OCEAN SPRINGS, Miss. – One by one the trucks hauling boats and trailers pulled into the Ocean Springs Harbor before daylight Tuesday, fishermen eager to check in, put their boats in the water and motor out to oyster reefs that haven't been harvested in 54 years.

When the sun came up just after 7 a.m., there were 45 boats in place with fishermen tonging and cleaning oysters a short time later.

By the end of the day, 46 boats were on the water, five recreational and 31 commercial. Together they harvested 441 sacks of oysters.

It was a special day for officials with the Mississippi Department of Marine Resources, one they have worked toward since 2014.

The reefs in Biloxi Bay were opened to tonging for the first time since 1964.

Joe Jewell grew up on The Point in Biloxi, and his family caught and sold seafood for a living. They harvested oysters in the winter and caught shrimp in the summer.

Jewell now is the director of MDMR's Office of Marine Fisheries, and he said the reopening of oyster reefs in the Biloxi Bay is good for the area's economy and its culture.

"From a historical standpoint, it's a wonderful connection to our history," he said. "Most families here have a connection to the seafood industry. This is how we built our seafood culture."

Mother Nature has not been kind to the Coast's oyster reefs in recent years. In 2004, fishermen harvested nearly 500,000 sacks of oysters. After Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the BP Oil Spill in 2010 and the opening of the Bonnet Carre' Spillway in 2011, that number has dwindled to about 40,000 sacks of oysters a year.

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In 2015, Gov. Phil Bryant formed the Governor's Oyster Council on Restoration and Resiliency, a group that devised a plan to increase the number of oysters harvested each year and identified ways to reach Bryant's goal of 1 million sacks per year by 2025.

One of those ways was opening reefs in Jackson County for harvesting and not just relying on tonging and dredging reefs in the western part of the Mississippi Sound, mainly in Pass Christian and Hancock County.

The Commission on Marine Resources opened those reefs Oct. 3, and they were closed Friday, Oct. 28 after fishermen took in just over 28,000 sacks of oysters.

Richard Gollott, who chairs the CMR and has served for 12 years, said he hopes there are enough oysters in the Biloxi Bay so that the season can remain open until Spring.

"I am elated that these reefs are open," he said Tuesday. "It looks like these are premium oysters."

Several generations of Gollott's family have been in the seafood industry, and he said he's been trying to get these reefs open since the 1970s.

"I want to thank Jamie Miller and the DMR staff who worked so hard to get this done," Gollott said. "They met with the FDA and did what needed to be done."

**Photos courtesy Mississippi Department of Marine Resources**

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**Carrol Batia, left, and Paul Batia, of D'Iberville, were among the fishermen who went tonging for oysters on reefs in the Biloxi Bay in Jackson County. The reefs were closed in 1962 and opened for the first time in 54 years on Tuesday, Nov. 1, 2016.**

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**Oyster fishermen harvested 441 sacks of oysters on Tuesday, Nov. 1, 2016 from reefs in the Biloxi Bay. Tuesday was the first time the reefs were open to oyster tonging since 1962.**

The Mississippi Department of Marine Resources is dedicated to enhancing, protecting and conserving marine interests of the state by managing all marine life, public trust wetlands, adjacent uplands and waterfront areas to provide for the optimal commercial, recreational, educational and economic uses of these resources consistent with environmental concerns and social changes. Visit the DMR online at [dmr.ms.gov](http://dmr.ms.gov).

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