

Big payoff from tiny Great Salt Lake shrimp eggs



By Mike Stark, 01/28/09

Turns out magical "sea monkeys" in the Great Salt Lake are pretty valuable as shrimp food, too.

This year, the state of Utah stands to make one of its biggest windfalls ever from the pursuit of tiny brine shrimp eggs at the lake.

State royalties collected from the annual harvest, which ends next week, could exceed \$700,000. That's on top of the \$1 million the state collects in shrimp permits.

"It's definitely good for us," said John Luft, the state's Great Salt Lake ecosystem program manager.

But for the companies that pursue the valuable eggs, mostly for sale and hatching overseas as food for table shrimp, the picture isn't so rosy.

The shrimpers are taxed based on how much raw material is scooped out of the lake in search of the eggs. But the amount of useable product is below-average this year, said Don Leonard, chairman of the Great Salt Brine Shrimp Cooperative, a collection of companies that plies the desert lake in search of the eggs.

So while the companies may pay out more in state royalty taxes this year, they'll likely see a smaller-than-normal percentage of sellable product.

"It's kind of a double-whammy," Leonard said.

Since the season started Oct. 1, 19 million pounds of "raw biomass" - a mix of shrimp, eggs, brine flies, empty shells, algae and other material - have been scooped up. That's the third-highest amount in records going back to 1985.

Feathery and prehistoric-looking, the half-inch brine shrimp are among the few creatures able to survive the super-salty waters of the Great Salt Lake. They feed on algae and are a key food themselves for millions of birds that stop by the lake each year.

Once a source for "sea monkeys" sold in the back of comic books, the shrimp have become a lucrative product, particularly those sold as food for fish being raised in commercial hatcheries.

Companies began collecting and selling tiny brine shrimp eggs - 50 can fit on the head of a pin - in the early 1950s.

Today, spotter planes, night-vision technology and global positioning systems help identify floating mats of reddish eggs in the lake, sometimes called "slicks." A boom is used to surround the eggs, which are then sucked into sacks on boats. Companies also scoop up pungent wind-blown rows of eggs on the lake's shores.

The eggs are washed, dried and vacuum-sealed. The prices varies. Last year, the eggs typically went for about \$11 a pound, Leonard said. Prices for this year's product haven't been settled yet, he said.

Buyers rehydrate the eggs with salt water. Hatched shrimp are then used as feed in commercial hatcheries.

Leonard said about 70 percent of the eggs go to Asia. In recent years, U.S. companies have been battling with Russian and Chinese companies for a share of the market.

Some years, though, the eggs just aren't there on a large scale.

In 2003, the four-month season yielded just 5 million pounds of biomass.

The eggs' availability varies widely year to year based on complex interactions between freshwater inflow, water circulation, weather conditions and other factors not completely understood.

"No two years are ever the same," Leonard said. "That's why it's such a challenging industry."

State officials keep track of the eggs in the lake by sampling at 17 sites and measuring how many turn up per liter. If the number dips too low, the shrimp season can be cut short.

There's no expectation that'll happen this year with just a few days left, Luft said.

Utah has come to depend on the royalties from the annual harvest.

The state collects 3.75 cents for each of pound of unsifted "biomass." This year, the royalties will bring in about \$708,000. That's in addition to the 79 state permits, each costing \$13,000, required to go after the shrimp.

Over the previous three years, the state has collected more than \$2.6 million in royalties and permit payments from the brine shrimp, according to Charlie Roberts, a spokesman for the state Tax Commission.

It's a sliver of the state's overall budget - which is about \$10 billion this year - but helps pay for managing the Great Salt Lake. Some of the money also goes to helping species struggling elsewhere in Utah such as the least chub minnow and the Utah prairie dog, said Greg Sheehan, administrative services chief for the state Division of Wildlife Resources.

But like nearly every other industry, the business of catching and selling brine shrimp at the Great Salt Lake is bracing for a tumultuous 2009.

As faraway commercial hatcheries cut back production, demand for shrimp eggs will likely follow. And on top of that, seafood consumption seems to be easing up a bit, Leonard said.

"We're a little bit nervous about that," he said.

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