

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

March 21, 2009

For More Information Contact

Phil Giaramita (804) 864-7008

VDH BEGINS RECALL OF SOME MISSISSIPPI OYSTERS, WARNS CONSUMERS

Virginia-grown oysters not part of recall

(RICHMOND, Va.)—The Virginia Department of Health (VDH) has begun recalling oysters harvested from one section of Mississippi’s Gulf Coast waters. The department said that it is notifying all shellfish dealers and food distributors in Virginia that oysters harvested from section 2C off of Mississippi’s Gulf Coast have been linked to an outbreak of norovirus in Tennessee. The health department said that oysters affected by the recall should be removed from most markets in Virginia by early next week.

Oysters harvested from Virginia, from other states, and from areas in Mississippi that are outside of section 2C, are not part of the recall and are safe for consumption.

The limited recall, announced last evening by VDH, affects oysters harvested between February 24 and March 17. It was initiated after an investigation by Tennessee health officials linked a norovirus outbreak in their state to raw oysters from Mississippi’s section 2C. There have been no reports of illnesses in Virginia linked to this outbreak.

“We are taking this precautionary step based on medical evidence that confirms that oysters harvested from section 2C were contaminated with norovirus,” said State Health Commissioner Karen Remley, M.D., MBA. “As a prudent measure, because norovirus is so contagious and because oysters from the affected area are sold in Virginia, we have taken this action to protect the public’s health. We will continue to monitor the investigation and respond as appropriate.”

Earlier today, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) advised retailers and food service operators not to offer for sale, oysters harvested from section 2C between February 24 and March 17. The FDA said it is working with Mississippi’s Department of Marine Resources to investigate potential sources of pollution. The agency said it is testing oysters harvested from the affected areas and will provide updates as the investigation continues.

Symptoms of norovirus infection include nausea, vomiting, diarrhea and stomach cramping. Affected individuals often experience low-grade fever, chills, headache, muscle aches and a general sense of tiredness. Most people show symptoms within 48 hours of exposure to the virus, with the illness lasting one to two days. However, the illness can become serious for the very young, the elderly and people with weakened immune systems.

Dr. Remley emphasized that oysters harvested in Virginia are safe for consumption. She added that VDH's Division of Shellfish Sanitation inspects shellfish harvesting areas on a regular basis to monitor water quality and ensure the safety of oysters and other shellfish grown in Virginia. There has been no known outbreak of food-borne illness linked to Virginia shellfish in more than 40 years.

“Virginia is very proud of its shellfish industry and our longstanding partnership with shellfish dealers. We will continue to work closely with them in protecting the health of our consumers and our industry,” Dr. Remley said.

The Commonwealth requires shellfish dealers in Virginia to clearly identify the origin of oysters sold in the shell. Consumers are urged to ask their retailers or restaurants for information on where oysters have been harvested before eating the shellfish. VDH urges consumers to discard oysters whose growing area cannot be identified or those which are known to have been harvested from section 2C in Mississippi. When discarding oysters, consumers should be careful to thoroughly wash their hands. Hand washing is an effective preventive measure against norovirus.

Consumers concerned about oysters purchased during the recall period should contact their place of purchase to determine if the oysters are from the affected area.

Consumers who ate oyster products during the recall period and have experienced symptoms of norovirus are encouraged to contact their health care provider or local health department.

VDH reminds consumers that persons with weakened immune systems, including those affected by AIDS, and persons with chronic alcohol abuse, liver, stomach or blood disorders, cancer, diabetes or kidney disease should avoid raw oyster consumption altogether, regardless of where the oysters are harvested.

###