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PUBLIC WORKS DEPARTMENT**

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SHELLFISH HARVESTING REOPENED IN BIRCH BAY

BIRCH BAY— On January 16th, the Washington State Department of Health (DOH) upgraded 129 acres of shellfish beds in Birch Bay from **Prohibited** to **Approved** for shellfish harvesting. For the past 10 years, the waters around the mouth of Terrell Creek in the center of Birch Bay have been closed to shellfish harvesting due to pollution. Years of hard work and collaboration by community members, non-profit organizations, and local government have resulted in water quality improvements in Terrell Creek. This is a community success worth celebrating!



In 2008, the area around the mouth of Terrell Creek, the largest tributary into Birch Bay, was closed year-round to shellfish harvesting due to high counts of fecal coliform bacteria in Terrell Creek. Fecal coliform bacteria are an indicator of animal and human waste in the water. The creek originates at Lake Terrell and meanders approximately nine miles through rural, farm, industrial, and urban areas

before emptying into Birch Bay, picking up fecal coliform bacteria from a variety of sources along the way.

Community efforts to protect water quality in Terrell Creek and Birch Bay began before the shellfish harvesting closure. Water quality protection and improved stormwater management were primary concerns addressed by Birch Bay community members in the 2004 Birch Bay Community Plan. At the same time, Whatcom County Marine Resources Committee (MRC) member and Birch Bay resident Gerald “Jerry” Larson initiated efforts to recover healthy shellfish populations in Birch Bay. Jerry took the lead on building the MRC’s clam survey and water quality monitoring programs.

Actions taken to reduce human waste pollution have included evaluation and repair of septic systems, use of public restrooms while visiting the beach, and consistent use of marina pump-out stations. Bacteria pollution from animal waste has been reduced through fencing farm animals out of waterways, managing manure in pastures and storage areas, planting shrubs and trees along creek banks, picking up pet waste, and securing pet food to deter wildlife.

Building off this initial work, the Birch Bay Watershed and Aquatic Resources Management (BBWARM) District was created in 2007 in response to community concerns about water quality, flooding, and loss of aquatic habitat in the Birch Bay watershed. This district has been constructing facilities to assist with drainage problems and stormwater treatment, as well as hosting many workshops and events to help community members find solutions to drainage and water quality problems.

Between 2009 and 2015, Whatcom County and the Whatcom Conservation District received grant funding from the Environmental Protection Agency to enhance water quality monitoring, improve stormwater management, and implement the Terrell Creek Landowner Stewardship Program. This program provided technical and financial assistance to landowners in the Terrell Creek watershed for non-dairy agriculture best management practices and septic system maintenance, repair, and replacement. Additionally, outreach events coordinated through this program, like Run with the Chums 5k Fun Run help raise awareness of water quality issues in the watershed. This work continues through BBWARM and Whatcom Conservation District efforts today.

The reopening of these shellfish beds is distinct from seasonal closures due to naturally-occurring biotoxins that occasionally affect shellfish harvesting on local beaches. Biotoxin closures can occur unexpectedly due to rapidly changing biotoxin levels, which are monitored by DOH and Whatcom County Health Department. Shellfish harvesters should always “Check Before You Dig” to determine if it’s safe and legal to harvest. For current beach health status and harvesting seasons, visit www.doh.wa.gov/shellfishsafety.html or call WCHD at (360) 778-6000.

For more information about Birch Bay water quality and programs, visit www.whatcomcounty.us/1072/Water-Quality and www.bbwarm.whatcomcounty.org. A community celebration is being planned for this spring/summer in Birch Bay – stay tuned!

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