

**WHATCOM COUNTY
PUBLIC WORKS DEPARTMENT**

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PORTAGE BAY REOPENED TO SPRING SEASON SHELLFISH HARVEST FOR LUMMI NATION

BELLINGHAM—Effective April 1, Washington Department of Health will lift spring season harvest restrictions on approximately 800 acres of important Lummi Nation shellfish beds in Portage Bay. This significant achievement is due to the pollution prevention actions of community members who have helped to improve water quality in the Nooksack River watershed and Portage Bay. When diverse groups come together, we can achieve community solutions for clean water.

“This is a prime example of how successful we can be when communities pull together to protect and improve sensitive, important resources,” said Scott Berbells, manager, Shellfish Growing Area Section. “We can all take pride in the results of that teamwork in the Nooksack Watershed.”

Prior to this spring season reopening, a portion of the bay has been formally closed from April through June and October through December each year since 2015 due to high bacteria levels in the marine water, though there was a voluntary closure initiated by the Lummi Nation beginning in September 2014. Tribal shellfish harvest will now be approved January through September. The fall harvest closure will remain in effect October through December due to continued poor water quality during this period in the Nooksack River and Portage Bay.

“This is a big, positive change for the Lummi People,” states Merle Jefferson, Lummi Natural Resources Department Executive Director. “Now, when the sunny days and low daytime tides are here, our people will again be able to harvest shellfish from Portage Bay.” He continues, “We are glad to see that the spring season harvest closure is being lifted, but we remain concerned about continued poor water quality during the fall months. As we move forward in tackling the remaining problems, the Lummi Nation remains committed to continuing to work with community partners to improve water quality throughout the Nooksack River watershed.”

Whatcom County created the Portage Bay Shellfish Protection District and advisory committee in 1998 to address the bay’s bacteria pollution and poor water quality. Between 1996 and 2006, portions of Portage Bay were closed to shellfish harvesting year-round. By 2006, after many management and infrastructure changes and resulting improvements to water quality, Washington Department of Health (DOH) removed the harvesting restrictions. However, after just a few years of relaxed attention to preventing pollution, bacteria levels in both the Nooksack River and Portage Bay began to climb. By 2015 DOH closed harvest during spring and fall seasons for 800 acres of shellfish beds in Portage Bay.

Local, state, tribal and federal agency partners formed the Whatcom Clean Water Program to strengthen and coordinate bacteria Pollution Identification and Correction (PIC) activities with landowners. PIC program activities since 2014 have involved Portage Bay Shellfish Protection District Advisory Committee members, tribes, agencies, Watershed Improvement Districts (WIDs), non-profits, and community residents who continue to work to find and fix preventable bacteria pollution sources.



Lummi tribal members harvesting shellfish on tribally-owned tidelands of the Lummi Indian Reservation. Photo courtesy of Lummi Natural Resources Department.

Albert deBoer, Chair of the Portage Bay Shellfish Protection District Advisory Committee stated, “When we began seeing bacteria levels on the rise again, we brought the advisory committee back together to figure out what was going wrong. This success is built out of a team effort representing diverse views and looking at all potential bacteria sources – septics, sewers, livestock, pets, and wildlife. Coordinated agency efforts focused on building trust and working cooperatively with watershed residents have also been essential to reducing fecal bacteria. We look forward to continuing our work to be able to reopen harvest in the fall season.”

Everyone can play a part!

Actions to reduce bacteria pollution from human waste have included evaluation and repair of septic systems and work in the City of Lynden to address sewer cross connections and to offer sewer hook up to eligible residents. Activities to reduce bacteria pollution from animal waste include following guidance provided by the [Manure Spreading Advisory](#), fencing farm animals out of saturated pastures and waterways, managing manure and mud in pastures and storage areas, planting shrubs and trees along creek banks, picking up dog waste, and securing pet food to deter wildlife. Grants from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) National Estuary Program (NEP) have supplemented local and state funds and programs to provide additional resources to address this large geographic area and its diverse sources of fecal-related bacteria.

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While the reopening of the spring season to harvest is great news, there is still much work to be done. The fall shellfish harvest closure in Portage Bay will remain in place as work continues to find and fix preventable bacteria pollution sources that result in high levels of bacteria in water during this period.

For more information about Nooksack River Watershed water quality and programs visit the Whatcom County Public Works – Natural Resources website at <http://www.whatcomcounty.us/1072/Water-Quality> and Washington State Department of Agriculture's [online storymap](#).

Resources for Landowners

[Finding and Fixing Problems](#)

[Small Farm Workshops and Rebate Program](#)

[Septic System Workshops](#)

[Septic Maintenance Rebate Program](#)

END