



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Biotoxin Closure Expanded in Northern Whatcom County

BELLINGHAM, WA —Unsafe levels of Paralytic shellfish poisoning (PSP) biotoxin are now present in molluscan shellfish in Birch Bay and Drayton harbor. To protect the public, the Washington State Department of Health (DOH) expanded the biotoxin closure for all recreational harvest on beaches from Birch Point north to the Canadian Border including all of Point Roberts.

Shellfish sold in restaurants and retail markets have been tested before distribution and are safe to eat.

The Whatcom County Health Department will continue to monitor biotoxins in molluscan shellfish. We will notify the public when there is a change in biotoxin levels that may affect public health.

Algae that contain marine biotoxins cannot be seen and must be detected by laboratory testing. During a biotoxin event, mussels and varnish clams usually contain the highest toxin concentration. PSP and other naturally occurring biotoxins are not destroyed by cooking or freezing. Crab meat is not affected, but “crab butter” and crab entrails can harbor biotoxins so they should always be discarded. Molluscan shellfish include clams, mussels, oysters and scallops.

PSP biotoxin can cause severe illness and death. Symptoms include numbness and tingling of lips and tongue, which may begin within minutes of eating toxic shellfish or may take an hour or two to develop. Symptoms may progress to tingling of fingers and toes and then loss of control of arms and legs, followed by difficulty in breathing. Some people feel nauseous or experience a sense of floating. If a person consumes enough toxin, muscles of the chest and abdomen become paralyzed, including muscles used for breathing, and the victim can suffocate. Death from Paralytic Shellfish Poison has occurred in less than 30 minutes.

Shellfish harvesters should also note that the Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife issued an order closing all recreational intertidal molluscan shellfish harvest due to the COVID-19 outbreak. Please see this link for the most up-to-date information about molluscan shellfish harvesting: <https://medium.com/@wdfw/frequently-asked-questions-reopening-state-lands-fishing-and-hunting-967a6726fe26>.

Biotoxin levels can change rapidly. Shellfish harvesters are advised to “Know Before You Dig”. Always check for current biotoxin and pollution closures at the DOH website: <http://www.doh.wa.gov/ehp/sf/biotoxin.htm> or call the DOH Biotoxin Hotline at 1-800-562-5632 before harvesting shellfish anywhere in Washington State.

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