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Hood Canal beaches closed from Dabob to Mason County because of high levels of toxin

By Leah Leach

Peninsula Daily News

BRINNON — A portion of Hood Canal shoreline never before closed to recreational shellfish harvesting due to the potentially deadly paralytic shellfish poisoning toxin is now off limits.

The state Department of Health has closed Hood Canal beaches from Dabob Bay south to the Jefferson County-Mason County line, Michael Dawson, water quality lead for Jefferson County Environmental Health, said Monday.

A sample of mussel tissue found 147 micrograms of the marine biotoxin that causes paralytic shellfish poisoning (PSP) last week.

That's about 1½ times over the safety threshold of 80 micrograms per 100 grams of shellfish, Dawson said.

"It's new for people in the Brinnon area to have to worry about PSP, but I think we got the word out," Dawson said.

He urged recreational shellfish harvesters to get the latest information before they leave for the beach by checking www.doh.wa.gov or phoning 800-562-5632.

Shellfish harvested commercially are tested for toxin prior to distribution and should be safe to eat.

The shorelines were closed to recreational harvesting of molluscan shellfish such as clams, oysters, mussels and scallops late Friday and warning signs were erected Saturday, Dawson said.

"This closure is the first time this area of Hood Canal has been closed for PSP," he said.

The recent action extends a Sept. 8 closure of Quilcene and Dabob bays, where PSP toxin concentrations were found of more than 6,000 micrograms per 100 grams of shellfish.

On Sept. 23, the concentration in Quilcene Bay rose to 12,688 micrograms, one of the highest results ever.

"We haven't seen levels that high in a long time," Dawson said.

Since then, the concentration there has decreased, with a measurement of 3,514 at one site, he said.

"It's still very high," Dawson said.

Any amount over 80 micrograms, even slightly higher, can be deadly.

In the case of lower concentrations, "everybody responds a little bit differently," Dawson said.

"Depending on a person's body weight, genetic makeup and how much they ate, it could act within minutes," especially in conjunction with alcohol.

If the concentration is in the thousands "it's deadly across the board," Dawson added.

Symptoms of PSP can appear within minutes or hours and usually begins with tingling lips and tongue, moving to the hands and feet, followed by difficulty breathing and possible death.

Anyone experiencing such symptoms should contact a health care provider immediately, and call 9-1-1 in extreme cases.

The toxins are not destroyed by freezing or cooking.

PSP closures are frequent at the end of the summer, but not in the area of Hood Canal that was closed last week, Dawson said.

Different this year

"It's acting differently this year. There were some closures in south Puget Sound this year too," he said.

"We often have high concentrations on outer coast. That didn't happen this year," Dawson added.

"It showed up in a different place this year," he said, adding the cause of the change is unknown.

So far, he hadn't seen PSP on the Kitsap County side of the canal, he said.

The current Jefferson County areas closed to the recreational harvest of all species of shellfish are Quilcene Bay, Dabob Bay and Hood Canal south to the Mason County line, Discovery Bay and all west coast ocean beaches.

Kilisut Harbor including Mystery Bay and Port Ludlow including Mats Mats Bay are closed to the recreational harvest of butter and varnish clams only.

In Clallam County, the recreational harvest of butter clams is closed from Cape Flattery to Dungeness Spit.

Varnish clams are closed along the entire North Olympic Peninsula.

Sequim Bay is closed to all species of shellfish.

Seasonal closures are in effect for all Pacific Ocean beaches.

The closure does not apply to shrimp.

Crabmeat is not known to contain the biotoxin, but the guts can contain unsafe levels.

To be safe, clean crab thoroughly and discard the guts, health officials say.

Although the algae that creates PSP is commonly referred to as “red tide,” in most cases it can’t be seen.

“Sometimes there are algae blooms that color the water red, but those often are not the toxic ones,” Dawson said.

The only way to know if the toxin is present is through laboratory testing. The results of routine tests lead to harvesting closures.

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