



# News Release

**For immediate release:** March 24, 2015

(15-045)

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## **Shellfish harvest in Portage Bay limited due to periodic pollution**

**OLYMPIA** — The state Department of Health has placed restrictions on shellfish harvesting for part of Portage Bay in Whatcom County due to high levels of bacteria. Water tests show that at certain times, the shellfish area is affected by polluted runoff from the Nooksack River.

Portage Bay usually has good water quality, but during specific times of the year the Nooksack River carries higher levels of bacteria into the shellfish harvesting area. As a result, state health officials have changed the classification of nearly 500 of the 1,300 commercial shellfish harvesting acres in the bay from “approved” to “conditionally approved.” Harvesting in the conditionally approved area will be closed each year from April through June and again from October through December.

“When Portage Bay has high bacteria levels there’s a greater risk of people getting sick from eating shellfish from the area,” said Secretary of Health John Wiesman. “These restrictions are clearly a hardship for the Lummi Nation’s commercial, ceremonial, and subsistence shellfish harvesting, yet it’s our responsibility to make sure contaminated shellfish doesn’t reach consumers. We’ve have success in our state restoring other polluted waters, and we hope for significant progress with efforts to clean up the Nooksack River watershed.”

This isn’t the first time restrictions have been placed on Portage Bay. In the late 1990s, poor water quality resulted in restrictions to shellfish harvesting in this area.

“This closure is devastating for the approximately 200 families on the Lummi Reservation who make their living harvesting shellfish,” said Lummi Nation Chairman Timothy Ballew II.

“During the last 10-year closure, the tribal community lost jobs and millions in revenue. Ultimately, the closure affects all Lummi people because this shellfish area is sacred to our people and critical to our way of life.”

— More —

Work to find and stop pollution sources in the Nooksack River watershed at that time resulted in improved conditions and, by 2006, the shellfish harvest area was reopened.

Whatcom County received funding in 2014 from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to strengthen a locally-led process of identifying and correcting pollution sources. Lummi Natural Resources, Whatcom Conservation District, and the state departments of Health, Agriculture, and Ecology are working with Whatcom County and the Portage Bay Shellfish Protection District on strategies to improve the conditions in the shellfish growing area.

“I am very concerned about the deterioration of water quality in Portage Bay,” said Whatcom County Executive Jack Louws. “I worked with the County Council to incorporate additional water resource staffing and programs into the 2015 County budget to help restore our waterways to safe and healthy conditions. We, as a community, came together to tackle this problem before, and I’m confident we can do it again.”

The Department of Health is responsible for the safety of commercial shellfish harvested in the state. The agency’s Office of Environmental Health and Safety uses national standards to classify all commercial shellfish harvesting areas.

The [Department of Health website](http://www.doh.wa.gov) (www.doh.wa.gov) is your source for *a healthy dose of information*. Also, [find us on Facebook](#) and [follow us on Twitter](#).

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