

The Office of Shellfish and Water Protection works to improve the health of people in Washington State by ensuring shellfish are safe to eat, beaches are safe for swimming and on-site sewage and reclaimed water systems are properly designed and managed.

Shellfish Program

The Shellfish Program is responsible for providing sanitary control of molluscan shellfish (oysters, clams, and mussels). The program works closely with tribes, local health jurisdictions, volunteer groups, state and federal agencies, and the shellfish industry. Key Components of the program include:

Biotoxin Monitoring—The program has an extensive marine biotoxin monitoring network to detect paralytic shellfish toxin and domoic acid in shellfish. Commercial and recreational areas are sampled on a regular basis and closed as necessary.

Growing Area Classification—Sanitary surveys are conducted in commercial and recreational growing areas to determine their suitability for shellfish harvest. The surveys include water quality monitoring and pollution source evaluations of the surrounding area. There are about 100 commercial growing areas and 250 recreational beaches currently classified.

Illness Investigations—Washington State has an international reputation for providing safe shellfish; however, illness outbreaks occasionally do occur. The program works closely with local, Tribal, state and federal health officials to investigate shellfish related illnesses and to take necessary prevention steps, such as closing growing areas and recalling product.

Licensing, Certification, and Inspection—All shellfish harvesters, processing facilities and wholesale dealers are licensed annually, and inspected on a regular basis to determine compliance with applicable sanitary standards. In order for our commercial shellfish industry to ship interstate, our program must meet requirements of the National Shellfish Sanitation Program established under the federal Food and Drug Administration. We currently license over 300 operations.

Puget Sound Ecosystem Monitoring Program—The department participates in this program through its water quality and biotoxin monitoring programs. Program staff analyze data to determine the status and trends of fecal pollution and biotoxin levels in Puget Sound.

Recreational Shellfish—This program provides recreational harvesters with timely information so they can make informed decisions about where and when it is safe to harvest shellfish. Local health jurisdictions play an important role in this program through their participation in sample collection for biotoxin monitoring, and development and implementation of education and outreach programs.

Restoration—The goal of the Restoration Program is to reopen commercial and recreational shellfish beds that have been closed or reclassified and to prevent the closure of shellfish areas that are still open but threatened. Program staff work closely with local government, other state agencies, Tribes, and other stakeholders to identify pollution sources and correct them.

Wastewater Program

The Wastewater Program is responsible for the safe treatment and dispersion of domestic, non-industrial wastewater in areas of Washington not served by municipal sewage treatment works.

Individual On-site Sewage System (OSS) (septic systems)—Individual and small (up to 3,500 gallons/day) on-site sewage systems are permitted and regulated by local health jurisdictions. Department staff provide consultative and technical support to local health jurisdictions and develop/maintain guidance documents for various technologies. Staff review proprietary wastewater system products to verify they meet testing protocol requirements and maintain a list of products meeting the requirements for use throughout the state.

Large On-Site Sewage System (LOSS)—Staff review and approve plans for on-site sewage systems designed to handle wastewater flows greater than 3,500 but less than 100,000 gallons per day. Staff also review and approve all septic tanks, pump chambers, and other tanks used as part of small and large systems in Washington State.

Water Reclamation and Reuse—Working with the Department of Ecology, staff review and approve proposals for the reclamation and reuse of wastewater.

BEACH Program

The Washington Swimming BEACH Program (Beach Environmental Assessment, Communication and Health) is administered jointly by the Washington State Departments of Health and Ecology. The two agencies work with local agencies, Tribes, and volunteers to protect people who play on Washington's saltwater beaches.

Swimming in contaminated saltwater can cause illness in humans. The BEACH program monitors beaches for fecal bacteria, notifies the public when the results are high, and educates beach goers on how to avoid getting sick from playing in saltwater.

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