

Why is the Samish Bay shellfish area having its status downgraded?

The Department of Health has found that when the Samish River water levels are high the fecal coliform bacteria levels in Samish Bay are also high. These bacteria travel from the river and other water sources into the bay. Higher bacteria levels increase the risk of getting sick from eating raw or undercooked shellfish.

What are the responsibilities of the Department of Health regarding shellfish?

We're responsible for making sure that harvested shellfish are safe to eat. Another agency goal is keeping shellfish harvesting areas open whenever shellfish are safe to eat. We do this by following U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) national standards. Using these FDA standards helps us protect public health. Washington shellfish that don't meet the standards are not allowed to be shipped to other states.

Have there been any illnesses linked to contaminated shellfish from Samish Bay?

Samish Bay shellfish were the source of two of the state's largest shellfish-related illness outbreaks. In 1994, the Department of Health responded to an outbreak linked to oysters harvested from the bay. In 2003, there was another illness outbreak from shellfish harvested from the same part of the bay.

What's contaminating the Samish Bay?

Rural agricultural areas drain into the Samish River. Farmland runoff, septic systems, and wildlife are the sources of the fecal contamination. When it rains, contaminants wash off the land into the river and then into the bay.

Is Samish Bay closed for shellfish harvesting at all times?

Using the current closure criteria, we expect Samish Bay to be closed between 30 and 70 days in 2011. The number of days could be fewer if the bacterial sources are found and fixed. Tests show that these extremely high bacteria levels occur in the spring and late fall. Most of Samish Bay is closed for up to five days after these conditions occur.

Do the closures apply to recreational shellfish?

There are no public shellfish harvesting beaches in the area affected by contamination from the Samish River. However, we recommend that private property owners not collect shellfish for five days after there has been a half-inch or more of rainfall in the watershed in 24-hours.

Are fish and other sea life from Samish Bay included in the closure?

The closures only apply to shellfish like oysters, clams, and mussels. Shellfish are filter feeders. They filter everything in the water around them and tend to accumulate bacteria, viruses, and other harmful substances.

What criteria are used to close Samish Bay?

The Department of Health closes Samish Bay when the river discharges more than 4.7 trillion bacteria per day. A rapid rise in the flows of the Samish River is the best predictor that fecal coliform in the bay has risen above acceptable limits.

Are things getting better or worse over time?

It's hard to tell because we don't yet have enough data collected during storms to establish trends. We know that action can be taken to improve the situation.

What will it take to keep the shellfish beds open?

If the fecal coliform levels are held below 4.7 trillion fecal coliform per day, the bay won't be closed. To reduce the bacteria levels, people in the area should do such things as properly dispose of animal waste and make sure their septic systems are working correctly.

What is being done about it?

The pollution comes from many sources and will likely be reduced only through cooperation and action from government and non-government agencies, farmers, businesses, and individual people. Monitoring, pollution source identification, storm event sampling, and inspections of on-site sewage systems and farms are happening now.

What can you do about it?

Get involved in the activities throughout the Samish Bay watershed area.

- Contact the Skagit Conservation District to learn how you can use best management practices around your farm to keep the animals away from the river, creeks, streams, and drainages. Update your farm plan and make it a useful tool.
- Contact the Skagit County Health Department and make sure your septic system is in compliance with the county's operation and maintenance program.
- Attend public meetings held in the area to discuss the issues and work on solutions.