

Marine toxin prevents opening at Long Beach, delays decision on remaining beaches

Local News

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Posted on : January 22, 2010 at 5:43 am

OLYMPIA - Rising marine toxin levels have prompted the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) to cancel a razor clam dig scheduled at Long Beach and delay final decisions about digs at Twin Harbors, Copalis and Mocrocks beaches until next week.

Olympic National Park will also wait until next week to decide on a dig at Kalaloch Beach, pending the results of further biotoxin testing.

Previous plans for a dig starting late next week were put on hold after routine testing found elevated levels of paralytic shellfish poisoning (PSP) in clams collected on coastal beaches, said Dan Ayres, WDFW coastal shellfish manager.

PSP is a marine toxin produced by a certain type of algae that can cause paralysis and even death if consumed in sufficient quantities.

Ayres said toxin levels in clams dug this week at Long Beach violate health standards established by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, ruling out an opening at that beach. Early next week, WDFW will conduct additional tests on clams collected at the other beaches, where PSP levels also appear to be on the rise.

"It's always disappointing to cancel a razor clam dig, and we hate to make people wait for answers on the other beaches," Ayres said. "But public safety comes first, which is why we test razor clams before every public dig."

Ayres said final decisions on a revised razor-clam opening will be announced by Thursday, Jan. 28. Unless it is canceled, the dig at Twin Harbors will be delayed, since it was originally scheduled to open Jan. 27, Ayres said.

Updates on the razor clam dig scheduled for next week will be posted on WDFW's website at <http://wdfw.wa.gov/fish/shellfish/razorclm/season.htm>.

Frank Cox, marine biotoxin coordinator for the Washington Department of Health, said he suspects PSP is moving northward from the Oregon coast, where beaches have been closed to razor clam digging since December.

"There are a lot of uncertainties about how this will affect Washington beaches, which is why we recommend erring on the side of caution," he said.

Cox noted that the PSP toxin cannot be removed by cooking or freezing. Although no human fatalities from PSP have been reported in Washington since 1942, people still get sick every few years - usually after eating toxic shellfish collected from closed beaches, Cox said.

No coastal beaches have been closed to razor-clam digging because of elevated PSP levels since 1993, Ayres said. A different marine toxin, domoic acid, prompted a season-long closure in 2002-03.