

THE 2001 FISHERY

Preseason Planning

A joint trip by DOH, DNR and WDFW staff to the Spits was made in April 2001. The purpose of the trip was to determine how much area of the spits needed to be closed during the commercial fishery to minimize, if present, impacts to nesting seabirds. In the past a portion of Gunpowder Spit was elevated enough that it remained exposed even at high tide; grasses were present and it provided potential snowy plover habitat. During the May 2001 trip it was evident that erosion and shifting had eliminated elevated areas, it appeared that at high tide most if not all of the sand was immersed. With the absence of any potential habitat, no area of the Willapa Spits was closed during the commercial razor clam season. Because of the changing nature of these spits, it is recommended that the area be surveyed annually to determine the presence and/or extent of elevated areas and the potential for seabird habitat.

Concerns regarding the quality of water at the Willapa Spits had also been expressed. High levels of fecal coliform were thought possible given the apparent increase in harbor seal populations and the presence of seal haul-outs on the spits. In response to these concerns water samples were collected and analyzed in April and May 2001. Despite the presence of many seals in the vicinity, test results indicated the water quality was good. The exchange of water with each tide in Willapa Bay is nearly 60%, which ensures that any concentration of fecal coliform around the spits would be quickly and consistently dispersed.

To facilitate communication with harvesters, a “hotline” based out of the Region 6 office was established to provide commercial razor clam fishery and biotoxin sampling information.

Season and Landings

The commercial fishery opened Monday, June 25, 2001 but had to be closed again on Thursday, June 28 because biotoxin levels in samples collected on June 27 exceeded the action level. Sampling continued with the intention of reopening if another set of two consecutive samples tested below the action level threshold. Biotoxin levels in the samples collected on July 12 and July 19 were within acceptable ranges; the fishery reopened Monday, July 16. Biotoxin levels remained low, allowing the season to remain open without interruption until August 31, 2001.

Originally, the fishery had been scheduled to close July 31, 2001. The decision to extend the season through the end of August – resulting in a seven and one-half week season – was supported by the strong numbers of clams evident at the Willapa Spits, the good condition of the clams, continued interest by the diggers and the willingness by industry to assist in health sample collections.

A total of 69,859 pounds of razor clams were harvested during the 2001 season. This represents the third highest amount landed since 1976 (Table 1). The price paid for the razor clams ranged from \$1.00 to \$1.25 per pound. The majority of these clams were frozen for use as bait in the commercial Dungeness crab fishery. Seven commercial companies were certified by WDOH and 97 resident licenses were issued by WDFW. Except for three individuals, the buyers and harvesters were from Pacific and Grays Harbor Counties.

Biotoxin Sampling

Sampling for biotoxins began in April 2001 in anticipation that the commercial fishery season would start in May (Figure 6). Samples were collected from three different sites on the Willapa Spits. Two of the sites were on unnamed spits; the third was located on Gunpowder Spit.

In mid-summer, funding issues within the WDFW reduced staff availability for sampling and threatened closure of the season because a fishery cannot remain open without routine testing for biotoxins. Harvest was good and interest in the fishery remained strong so options to keep the season open were explored. Blue Heron, a clam buyer located at Bay Center, was contacted and agreed to coordinate the collection of samples. Registered diggers collected samples from the specified sites. The samples were then picked up at the buying station by WDFW staff and taken to Olympia for delivery to DOH laboratory facilities at Seattle. However, on several occasions, to meet DOH deadlines, crew from the Blue Heron delivered the samples directly to Olympia. This collaboration allowed the commercial season to remain open until the end of August.

Figure 6. Commercial Razor Clam Fishery Biotoxin Results, 2001.

