



DEC NEWS

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DEC Warns of PSP in Shellfish

May 7, 2004--Shellfish gatherers should be cautious of the dangers of Paralytic Shellfish Poison (PSP) from clams and mussels gathered on Alaska beaches. Low tides beginning this weekend and running into next week prompted the warning to sport harvesters.

The Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) is warning sport harvesters not to eat shellfish from beaches that DEC has not classified as safe. The department only classifies as safe those areas where the state tests clams and mussels regularly.

Classified safe beaches include: Halibut Cove Lagoon, Jakolof Bay, Kasitsna Bay (McDonald Spit), Tutka Bay, Chugachik Island, Sadie Cove, Polly Creek and Crescent River, all located in the Cook Inlet and Kachemak Bay area.

“The risks of PSP from clams and mussels from unclassified beaches are real. Don’t eat them,” said Mike Ostasz, DEC’s shellfish program coordinator. PSP occurs widely in Alaska and strikes people nearly every year.

The DEC warning does not apply to commercially-grown and harvested clams, mussels, other shellfish, crab, or shrimp available in grocery stores and restaurants. These shellfish are tested regularly before marketing. Ostasz said buying shellfish from retail outlets is safest, since supplies come from tested beaches.

Butter clams from the area known as Kachemak Bay East, which extends east-southeast of a line from Barbara Point to the mouth of Martin River, are closed to all commercial harvest due to unacceptable PSP levels. All harvesters are cautioned not to mistake small butter clams as littlenecks clams. Butter clams can be identified by the prominent concentric growth rings while littlenecks have rings which are concentric and intersecting at right angles.

PSP comes from algae, a food source for filter-feeding shellfish like clams and mussels. The shellfish store the toxin from the algae in their tissues. The toxin can be present even when there is no visible discoloration or so-called red tides in ocean water.

Recently, the toxin also has been found in crab viscera. The rest of the crab is considered safe. DEC cautions eating crab viscera from certain areas. To find out what locations are unsafe for crab viscera, contact Mike Ostasz.

PSP symptoms may appear in less than an hour after ingestion. Initial symptoms are a tingling or numbness in the lips and tongue, often followed by tingling and numbness in the fingertips and toes. These symptoms may progress to loss of muscle coordination, dizziness, weakness, drowsiness and incoherence. Vomiting should be induced at the first sign of symptoms and medical attention should be sought immediately.

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