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Press Release

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DEC Awards Funding for Recreational Shellfish Beach Monitoring

(JUNEAU, AK) – The Department of Environmental Conservation, Division of Environmental Health has awarded funding to four organizations to complete a Recreational Shellfish Beach Monitoring Pilot Program. Recipients include the Kodiak Island Borough School District, the Kachemak Bay Research Reserve, the Qagan Tayagungin Tribe and the Chilkoot Indian Association.

Each organization will collect and monitor commonly harvested shellfish for paralytic shellfish toxins (PST). The samples will be tested at the State of Alaska's Environmental Health Laboratory in Anchorage. The organization will then publicize test results and provide community outreach to shellfish harvesters. DEC's Division of Environmental Health will pay for shipping and testing costs.

This program is not sufficient to certify beaches as "safe" or completely ensure harvester safety from paralytic shellfish poisoning (PSP), but it will provide valuable information to recreational shellfish harvesters. The pilot will run from June 2012 to June 2015.

The program is designed to create a partnership with communities near popular recreational shellfish harvesting beaches. The communities chosen will monitor a wide geographic span of Alaska. The Kodiak Island Borough School District will monitor beaches in Kodiak, Port Lions, and Ouzinkie; the Kachemak Bay Research Reserve will monitor beaches in Homer, Ninilchik, Jackolof Bay, Bear Cove, and China Poot Bay; the Qagan Tayagungin Tribe will monitor beaches in Sand Point; and the Chilkoot Indian Association will monitor beaches in Haines.

"The program is heavily focused on community outreach and education," said DEC Environmental Health Director Kristin Ryan. "We hope this program will increase knowledge of local PST trends, establish knowledge of the risks of PST in specific harvests, and protect the health of Alaskans."

Filter-feeding shellfish like clams, mussels, oysters, geoducks and scallops ingest algae and store toxins in their edible body tissue. PST is most commonly associated with “red tides,” but the toxin can be present even when there is no visible discoloration in the ocean water. PSP can occur when humans ingest shellfish with high concentrations of the toxins. These toxins can result in death in humans in as little as two hours after consumption. PST cannot be cooked or cleaned out of shellfish. Currently, commercially grown shellfish is tested and considered safe.

More information on Paralytic Shellfish Poisoning can be found at:
<http://dec.alaska.gov/eh/RecShell/index.html>.

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