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JOINT RELEASE

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Alaska departments advise caution in harvesting shellfish

No "safe" months for recreational harvesting

ANCHORAGE — The Alaska departments of Health and Social Services and Environmental Conservation want all Alaskans to know that an article in the most current issue of Alaska Magazine (December/January), titled "Hunting the Mighty Cockle," contains incorrect information about the safety of eating recreationally harvested shellfish.

Contrary to information in the article, shellfish can contain the toxins that cause paralytic shellfish poisoning (PSP) any time of the year. The DHSS Section of Epidemiology has received reports of Alaskans with PSP during every month of the year; there are no "safe" months. In fact, pre-harvest testing by the Department of Environmental Conservation of commercial shellfish, sampled this week from Southeast Alaska, revealed toxic levels over four times what is considered safe for human consumption. Commercial shellfish that test positive for elevated levels of toxin are prohibited from being harvested or going to market.

Early signs of paralytic shellfish poisoning often include tingling of the lips and tongue. Symptoms may progress to tingling of fingers and toes, then loss of control of arms and legs, followed by difficulty breathing. Death can result in as little as two hours.

All locally harvested shellfish — including clams, mussels, oysters, geoducks and scallops — can contain paralytic shellfish poison. Crabmeat is not known to contain the PSP toxin, but crab guts can contain unsafe levels of toxin and should be discarded. There is no way to tell if a beach is safe for harvesting by looking at it. Toxins can be present in large amounts even if the water looks clear. Also, the toxin can remain in shellfish long after the algae bloom is over. **PSP cannot be cooked, cleaned or frozen out of shellfish.**

Commercially grown shellfish is tested and considered safe.

For more information on paralytic shellfish poisoning go to:
<http://dec.alaska.gov/eh/RecShell/index.html> or <http://www.epi.alaska.gov/id/dod/psp/default.htm>.

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