

THE 2003 FISHERY

Preseason Planning

Setting the 2003 commercial razor clam fishery was hindered by elevated biotoxin levels that persisted beginning in 2001 through the spring and summer of 2003. Plans were made for the fishery to open if the following criteria were met:

- Biotoxins levels met Department of Health guidelines;
- If possible, the recreational fishery had completed a spring season;
- There was sufficient time to prosecute a commercial season of at least four weeks before any fall recreational opportunity was scheduled;
- Industry would assist in collection of razor clams for biotoxin testing in-season.

A preseason public meeting was not held in 2003 because of the uncertainty regarding the fishery season. To facilitate communication with harvesters, a “hotline” based out of the Region 6 office was again established to provide commercial razor clam fishery and biotoxin sampling information. In future years, if the season is delayed past spring, license holders from the previous year will be notified several weeks in advance of any potential opening (pending toxin levels) by mail.

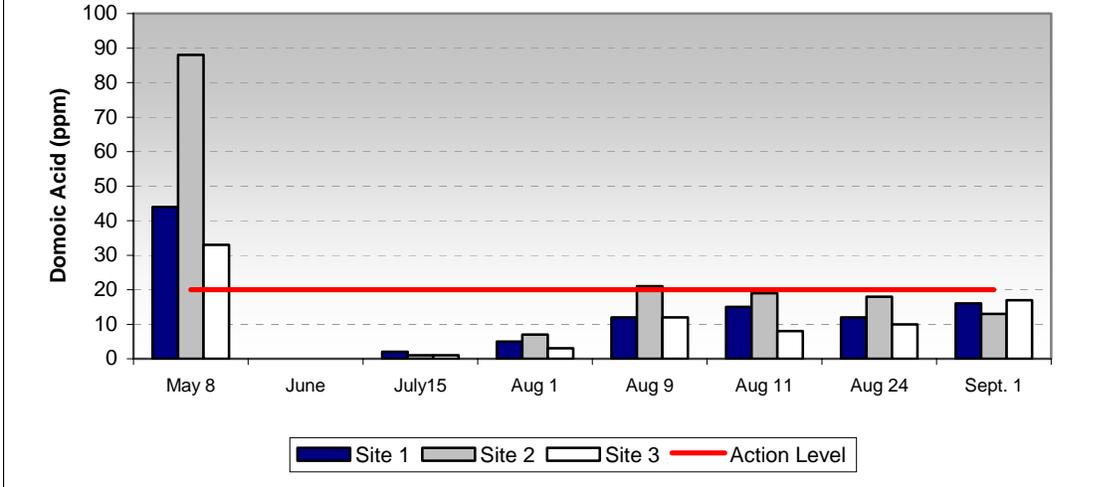
Season, Landings and Biotoxin Sampling

Razor clams were collected for biotoxin testing monthly from three locations at the spits beginning May 2003. Similar to the ocean beaches, domoic acid levels were high (Figure 4). It was not until mid-July before samples taken from the spits tested below the action level. Following Department of Health protocols a second set of samples was collected in late July. These also tested below the action level prompting the opening of the commercial season on August 9, 2003. The opening was short-lived. Razor clam samples collected on August 9 were analyzed and domoic acid levels were detected above the action level. The Department of Health closed the fishery on August 11.

Managers discussed whether to proceed with efforts to re-open the fishery. Domoic acid levels were borderline, but high and could easily exceed the action level again. Yet, a number of diggers had purchased licenses the morning of August 11 and not had an opportunity to dig by the time the fishery closed just after noon. Under state law, these license fees could not be refunded since the season had been opened, regardless of how long. Therefore, managers decided make every effort to open if possible, and continued monitoring toxin levels. The fishery opened again on August 26 when toxin levels fell below the action level. Toxin levels remained below the action level and the season closed as scheduled on September 14.

Figure 4. Commercial Razor Clam Fishery Biotoxin Results, 2003.

**2003 Willapa Spits
Commercial Razor Clam Fishery
Biotxin Sampling Results**



Total pounds landed for the season was 17,474 (Table 1). This was down considerably from previous years and was due to season timing, reduced effort, and apparent poor abundance. Effort was down because fishers had already engaged in other, more certain fishing opportunities by the time the razor clam season opened. And due to the lack of advance notice, many fishers were unaware the fishery had opened until after it was underway. Interest in the fishery dropped too, when it had to be closed after only two days, although it did re-open later. Reports by experienced diggers, of poor digging conditions (clams weren't showing) and scanty harvest from the initial opener further dampened interest in the fishery. Yet, some seasoned fishers reported good results at a couple of sites during one tide series.