



Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management

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EMERGENCY SHELLFISH HARVESTING CLOSURE IN LOCAL WATERS

Frequently Asked Questions: October 21, 2016

I'VE HEARD SOME LOCAL WATERS ARE CLOSED TO SHELLFISHING. WHAT'S HAPPENING?

On October 7 and 8, the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management and the Rhode Island Department of Health (RIDOH) announced precautionary shellfishing closures for Rhode Island waters. Impacted waters included Narragansett Bay, Mt. Hope Bay, Kickemuit River, Sakonnet River and their tributaries.

The closures, lifted on October 15, were due to a confirmed harmful algae bloom (HAB) of toxic phytoplankton, *Pseudo-nitzschia* spp. The harvest restriction did not apply to carnivorous snails such as whelk and moon snails. While *Pseudo-nitzschia* is commonly found in Narragansett Bay, this is the first time there has been a toxic bloom of this species in local waters. The bloom was first detected outside Newport Harbor. Also on October 7, the Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries closed Mount Hope Bay, Lee River and Coles River to shellfishing.

During Rhode Island's week-long closure, water and shellfish samples were analyzed for the presence of the toxin domoic acid which is responsible for amnesic shellfish poisoning in humans. Two water samples tested positive for the toxin. Shellfish samples from the area tested negative – along with all other shellfish samples collected throughout the Bay. The closure was lifted on October 15 as a result. Water and shellfish samples continued to be collected and analyzed given the bloom's ongoing presence in local and regional waters.

On October 20, given a preliminary positive finding of domoic acid in shellfish collected in lower Sakonnet River, [Harvester Tagging Area 5C](#) was closed to shellfishing. The following day, a shellfish collected from lower Narragansett Bay tested positive and a precautionary closure of lower Narragansett Bay and a portion of Rhode Island Sound was announced. The restrictions remains in effect until further notice and include carnivorous snails.

Impacted waters include all waters north of a line from Point Judith to Sakonnet Point Light and south of a line from the southern extension of 2nd street in the Sauga Point area of North Kingstown to Conanicut Point in Jamestown to the day marker at Halfway Rock in Portsmouth. The restriction also extends to waters south of an east/west line across the Sakonnet River lying one-quarter mile south of the pipeline found just south of Black Point.

Shellfish samples from the recently closed areas are undergoing additional testing to determine if the toxin is present at levels of concern. Shellfish samples from throughout Rhode Island waters will continue to be collected and analyzed until the bloom subsides.

For updates on shellfish closure areas, contact the DEM 24-hour shellfishing hotline at 401-222-2900 and/or sign up for the DEM Marine Fisheries email list at rimarinefisheries-subscribe@listserve.ri.gov. For more information on DEM divisions and programs, visit www.dem.ri.gov. Follow us on Facebook at www.facebook.com/RhodeIslandDEM or on Twitter (@RhodeIslandDEM) for timely updates.

WHAT IS A HARMFUL ALGAE BLOOM?

Harmful algae blooms (HAB) are naturally occurring – the cause of which is unknown. These blooms occur when colonies of algae—simple plants that live in the sea and freshwater—grow out of control and can begin to produce toxin known as domoic acid. Domoic acid can be harmful to birds and marine life and is responsible for causing

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amnesic shellfish poisoning (ASP) in humans. Symptoms of ASP include short- and long-term memory loss along with other serious health effects.

RIDEM regularly monitors local waters for the presence of phytoplankton that can produce a bloom. The current bloom appears to be part of a regional event – with waters in Massachusetts also closed to shellfishing. DEM and RIDOH continue to analyze water and shellfish samples from throughout local waters for the domoic acid toxin. To date, two water samples and one shellfish sample have tested positive. The preliminary positive shellfish sample was collected in lower Sakonnet River on October 19. As a result, lower Sakonnet River has been closed to shellfishing while further testing is conducted.

HAS THIS EVER HAPPENED BEFORE IN RHODE ISLAND WATERS? WHY IS IT HAPPENING NOW?

No. The current harmful algae bloom appears to be part of a regional, naturally occurring event. Waters in Massachusetts and Maine were also recently closed to shellfishing. Maine, as well as other New England states, commonly experience these blooms.

CAN I SEE THE PHYTOPLANKTON/BLOOM FROM THE WATER SURFACE? IS THIS RELATED TO ‘RUST TIDE’?

No. The phytoplankton are not visible from the water surface. The bloom is not caused by the recent rust tide outbreak.

HOW LONG WILL THE CLOSURE BE IN PLACE?

The emergency closures, as announced, will remain in effect until test results determine it is safe to reopen the waters to shellfishing. For updates on shellfish closure areas, contact the DEM 24-hour shellfishing hotline at 401-222-2900 and/or sign up for the DEM Marine Fisheries email list at rimarinefisheries-subscribe@listserve.ri.gov.

WILL EATING SHELLFISH MAKE ME SICK?

At this time, the public is advised to avoid eating shellfish from areas recently closed due to a preliminary finding of domoic acid in the shellfish.

SHOULD I AVOID CONTACT WITH THE WATER IN NARRAGANSETT BAY?

Contact with waterbodies experiencing toxic algae blooms is not advised.

HOW DO I SIGN UP FOR REGULAR UPDATES ON THE CLOSURE?

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