

Kate Brown takes slow, steady approach to being governor

By JONATHAN J. COOPER
Associated Press

SALEM — Thrust into the spotlight when John Kitzhaber resigned as governor amid influence-peddling investigations, Gov. Kate Brown set out on a slow, methodical approach to taking power.

She chose not to upend state government, replacing only the most senior advisers and one state agency head. She did not outline grand shifts in public policy and instead pursued the pieces of Kitzhaber's agenda she found most favorable.

Five months into her tenure, and with her first legislative session out of the way, Brown is showing no signs of changing her no curve-balls approach. In the coming months, her focus will be on implementing legislation that she and fellow Democrats pursued this year, she told The Associated Press in an interview.

"I bring a different personality to the office. And a different focus to the work," Brown said. "I think by any measure I've been able to accomplish an incredible amount given where I came in on this legislative session. And I certainly have my own ideas and own imprint in terms of what I want to accomplish."

Brown was in her second term as secretary of state when Kitzhaber stepped down following months of escalating scrutiny of his fiancée's business affairs, which overlapped with work she did for the governor.

Brown promised to

pursue a series of changes to the public records laws and ethics requirements for public officials. Lawmakers approved, despite strong Republican objections that the ethics reforms were far too skimpy to address the problems involving Kitzhaber.

"I think these are huge steps forward in terms of rebuilding public trust," Brown said, acknowledging that she can continue to increase the level of accessibility and transparency.

Brown was widely seen as more liberal than Kitzhaber, who sometimes frustrated liberals with his strong ties to business interests and his eagerness to cut public-employee retirement benefits.

So far, Brown has signed every bill sent to her by the Democratic-controlled Legislature. She declined to say whether there are bills in the pipeline that she's considering vetoing.

"When she began, I was concerned that she would be rubber-stamping the progressive program of the left wing," said Rep. Mike McLane of Powell Butte, the top Republican in the House. "I haven't seen her do much to dissuade that concern."

Brown lauded a number of legislative victories for Democrats: mandatory paid sick leave, a state-wide retirement savings plan and an initiative to use driving records to automatically register people to vote. All were largely in motion before Brown became governor and were approved in near party-line votes, helped by Democratic victories in last year's election.

Toxin falls in seawater but lingers in local shellfish

Too soon to predict whether problem will be resolved by fall clam season

By KATIE WILSON
EO Media Group

LONG BEACH, Wash. — Fishery managers and scientists say the plankton that produces domoic acid is still present but has apparently stopped producing the harmful marine toxin that shut down Dungeness crab and razor clam fisheries in Washington this spring.

Weekly samples and plankton monitoring work in early July show this particular plankton population has "dropped to background levels," said Dan Ayres, coastal shellfish manager with the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife.

"We might be getting a little break here on the coast, but I wouldn't say it's gone away," said Anthony Odell, with the University of Washington. Odell is the coastal sampling coordinator with the Olympic Region Harmful Algal Bloom (ORHAB) partnership and research analyst lead for ORHAB and the Forest Sciences Olympic Natural Resources Center.

The levels in razor clams are still very high — as are the levels in animals that eat razor clams. Recent samples of Dungeness crab guts on the Pacific County coast, where the crab fisheries are currently closed, revealed levels as high as 99 parts per million on July 8. This is substantially up from levels only a few weeks prior. On June 16, samples from the same area had levels that ranged from 12 ppm to a high of 58 ppm. The state Department of Health's threshold for crab is 30 parts per million.

A batch of razor clams collected by the Quinalt Tribe several weeks ago contained



EO Media Group File

Razor clams like these aren't harmed by the marine toxins they absorb while eating marine plankton, but these naturally occurring substances can linger in clam meat for months after algal blooms have ended.

levels of domoic acid that fell between 60 and 90 parts per million, well beyond the state DOH's clam threshold of 20 ppm.

Despite the decline in domoic acid production, most of the water off Pacific County is still considered to be at "action levels," and sampling and testing will continue.

In bloom

This bloom started in April, much earlier than usual, and has already persisted for months. It coincided with two other massive blooms, which, combined, make up the largest harmful algae bloom off the West Coast in more than a decade, according to NOAA, stretching as far south as Santa Barbara, Calif., and as far north as Alaska.

The plankton involved in these blooms usually require different conditions to thrive, but, this year, "they're thriving in similar conditions," Odell said. "I've never seen all of these things all at once."

The reason certain plankton produce domoic acid is still somewhat of a mystery though one theory is that the toxin helps the plankton survive times when nutrients are scarce. The blooms often occur in the spring, originating from the south — and in late summer or early fall, originating from the north.

A recent upwelling of deep ocean water brought more nutrients to the surface and could

be one reason domoic acid production has declined along parts of the Washington coast, researchers say.

Nothing about this year has been normal so far, though, and just because the toxin isn't being actively produced now doesn't guarantee it won't start up again later this summer, Odell said.

On June 15, NOAA announced it would be including extra scientists on a fisheries survey cruise specifically so they could study the algal blooms hitting the West Coast. Odell was aboard for a portion of that cruise, which is still working its way up the coast from California. On July 13, a spokesperson for NOAA said the survey boat was just beginning to pass northern California.

So far researchers on board have found a "significant amount of algae down there off California," said NOAA Spokesperson Michael Millstein.

This is part of what makes Odell think the lull off Washington could only be temporary.

"It would be nice to say that it's going away, but it's still out there and it's still pretty dense."

Toxin likely will linger

When high levels of the toxin were first detected this spring and WDFW and DOH ordered an emergency closure of the razor clam season

in May, commercial shellfish growers and harvesters in Willapa Bay also feared a shutdown. Levels were high in the bay and WDFW put growers and harvesters on standby. But then levels in the bay dropped quickly and the prospect of a shutdown vanished.

Though Ayres expects to continue to see high levels among razor clam populations in the weeks to come, the lack of "new" domoic acid is good news for other filter-feeders. The toxin doesn't seem to bond as tightly with these other shellfish's tissues. With less of the toxin now floating around in the water, other species will likely not be affected, Ayres said.

Bolstering his assurance is a recent test of anchovies entering the Columbia River which revealed no domoic acid whatsoever. In California, near Monterey Bay, where domoic acid levels have also been high and where the plankton is still actively producing the toxin, levels in anchovies have been high enough to warrant fishery closures.

Still, razor clams in particular have been known to hold on tight to domoic acid once it's in their systems. Ayres said he has seen high levels persist in razor clams for months after the toxin has left the area.

Research continues

Levels have been dangerously high since mid-May, when fishery managers in both Oregon and Washington decided to close down popular razor clam digs up and down the coast. WDFW also closed a small but valuable commercial razor clam fishery at the Willapa spits in Pacific County.

Then, in early June, commercial and recreational Dungeness crab fisheries were closed in the southern portion of the state, affecting commercial crabbers in Pacific County who were already grappling with a slow season. According to NOAA, this was the largest-ever closure of the state's multi-million dollar crab fishery.

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