

Clams: ‘Things have been tough so far’

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of Washington’s popular razor clam digs have been canceled, including the final digs of the spring season in May and the first three months of the fall dig that was originally slated to open in September.

Feeling the pressure

The saga on the coast has local business owners suffering the effects. Business owners in coastal communities depend on the influx of business provided by seasonal clam digs and the ongoing cancellations have hurt their bottom line during a notoriously tight time of year.

Tom Downer, owner of Jack’s Country Store in Ocean Park, knows exactly how important a rising tide of clam digging can be for local businesses. Downer says his business has gone so far as to register the Internet domain name, razorclams.com, in order to keep his out-of-town customers, “apprised of recent developments.”

“It’s had a noticeable effect,” Downer said of the ongoing clam closures. Downer recalled a Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife statistic showing that 10,000 to 15,000 people can hit Washington’s beaches on a good day. “It’s something that obviously a lot of people enjoy, so you’re going to feel an impact when it doesn’t happen.”

Downer added, “You have to make adjustments,” when the dependable business of clam diggers goes away “and sometimes those adjustments are not pleasant.”

Crab vs. clams

During the peak toxicity summer months, crabbing was shutdown along the entirety of the Washington coast. Domoic acid even worked its way around the Strait of Juan de Fuca and into Puget Sound, interrupting clam and crab seasons there as well. Most crabbing in Washington is back on track now, but clams



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Rising water temperatures have led to higher concentrations of a type of marine microorganism that produces the toxin domoic acid. A state fisheries official warns that it may take quite some time before clams are again safe to eat.

seem to absorb the toxin more deeply.

“The reason crab fishing is back open is that crab do not hang on to the toxin as long as razor clams,” explained Fish and Wildlife Coastal Shellfish Manager Dan Ayres. “While it appears crab pick up the toxin from eating razor clams, it appears that razor clam levels have dropped enough so that crab or no longer concentrating toxin in their tissues.”

“Razor clams are known to be the shellfish that hang on to the domoic acid longer than most any other species,” Ayres added. He spent Nov. 6 in Washington, D.C., as a keynote speaker at a congressional briefing on the perils of domoic acid. The hearing was arranged by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

Despite Ayres’ positive prognosis for coastal crab, the recreational crab fishery in Willapa Bay was recently closed indefinitely after tests conducted earlier this month showed domoic acid levels in the bay at 54 parts per million.

“Test results indicate crabs elsewhere on the coast are safe to eat,” explained Ayres in the

closure notice. “We’ll continue monitoring for marine toxins in Willapa Bay and elsewhere along the coast.”

Clams retaining toxin

Back in May when the first clam digs were canceled, there was hope that the coast would clear with the arrival of cooler and wetter weather and allow for fall and winter digging opportunities. Last week, though, the fish and wildlife department quelled that notion when they announced that there will be no coastal clam digs until at least mid-December. Beyond that, its unclear what will happen after December.

“The change in water conditions does affect the production of the toxic algae,” noted Ayers. “But the toxin levels we are currently seeing in razor clams (indicates) they are still hanging onto toxin they picked up last spring.”

Big economic impact

At Chico’s Pizza Parlor, a staple of the Long Beach Peninsula for the last 50 years, they depend on the tourism spurred by clam digs in order to survive the lean times that inevitably hit their beach com-

munity after the Rod Run to the End of the World classic car show rumbles in and out of town each September.

“Things have been tough so far because we haven’t had a clam tide,” said Jerry Wright of Ilwaco, a pizzamaker at Chico’s. “I was pretty shocked when the boss told me how much we were down, but then I kind of added the numbers up myself and it’s a big chunk. It was two whole weekends that we lost last month and it makes a big difference.”

Ayres also acknowledged the economic impact of the domoic acid outbreak and resulting shellfish closures, noting that, “Some coastal businesses have reported a significant drop in income as a result of this closure. I heard numbers anywhere from 30 percent to 50 percent.”

With so much uncertainty, the pervasive fear is that the entire clam digging season could be lost to the toxic algae outbreak. Domoic acid was first discovered off of the Washington coast in 1991 and since then domoic acid has caused the WDFW to cancel three entire razor clam digging seasons. Those closures



EO Media Group/File Photo

Washington Fish and Wildlife biologist Dan Ayres demonstrated a new Frisbee-like life saving flotation device while conducting research on the Long Beach (Wash.) Peninsula. Earlier this month, Ayres testified at a congressional hearing in the nation’s capital about the impacts of marine toxin on West Coast shellfish and ocean-dependent communities.

occurred in 1991-92, 1997-98 and 2002-03. Kalaloch Beach was also closed for the majority of 2004 and Long Beach weathered a two-day closure in 2005 due to domoic acid.

Uncertain future

Despite his expertise Ayres is uncertain about the immediate future of clam digging in Washington.

“Recall that the previous three closures due to this issue lasted for a full year. Those previous closures all began in the fall, and this one was different because it began in the spring,” noted Ayres. “... because the clams lost a lot of toxin during this summer’s spawning period, I am hopeful that we may actually be able to open some digging before the end of the season. But your guess is as good as mine as to when that might be.”

“We know diggers are anxious to get out onto the beaches, but public health is our primary concern.”

The reason the Fish and Wildlife has to exercise such caution is that domoic acid can cause illness, and even death, when consumed by humans. Additionally, there is no antidote to domoic acid poisoning, known as amnesic shellfish poisoning, and preparation methods such as freezing or

cooking the contaminated meat do nothing to diminish the toxicity levels.

Twenty parts per million is the standard accepted level of domoic acid in shellfish meat.

Before jetting off to his congressional testimony in D.C., Ayres noted, “Recall that this is a West Coast wide problem, not only in Washington but also in Oregon and California. There’s some significant issues with Dungeness crab in southern Oregon and northern California currently.”

As for Downer, who has been operating Jack’s Country Store for about two decades, he has come to expect the unpredictability that comes with running a business that is tied to the tides. “Clam digging is an important part of our business but we learned a long time ago not to become dependent on it,” explained Downer. “In the past we’ve had closures last as long as two years.”

That breadth of experience has imbued Downer with a salt-cured resolve. “We’ve made it 130 years,” noted the store owner. “So I think we can make it one more.”

Up to date domoic acid testing results for Washington’s beaches can be found on the WDFW website at <http://1.usa.gov/1XUJsqY>.

Barn: Hearing date for injunction is set for Dec. 10

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Despite evidence Smith had rented her barn out on numerous occasions, holes in the city’s code led Municipal Court Judge John Orr to determine Gearhart lacked specific rules prohibiting commercial wedding facilities.

In his decision, Orr recommended the city draft an ordinance with “greater clarity.”

In dismissing the two \$500 citations stemming from events at the barn in June and August, Orr urged the City Council to “refine and revise” its residential zoning ordinance in a timely fashion. After the ruling, the city dropped similar citations delivered to Smith for events said to take place throughout the summer.

However, administrative charges brought against her under the city’s building code remain pending, carrying potential penalties of \$5,000 each.

“This is the same situation, but two different boards that do not overlap,” City Manager Chad Sweet said Monday.

“The City Council has the final authority to make this decision based on the charges that they’ve laid out, and I don’t believe there is an appeal process.”

These charges were scheduled to go before Gearhart City Council Nov. 16, but will be rescheduled after Smith notified the city she was retaining lawyer Dan Kearns, who has successfully represented her in the earlier matters.

In addition to the hearing before the council, the city also sought an injunction in Circuit Court to prevent further commercial activity at Neacoxie Barn.

The injunction asks the court to enjoin Smith and co-owner Martha Strickland from using their property for commercial purposes without a conditional use permit, and for using their barn for commercial purposes without a certificate of occupancy.

“We’re going to Clatsop County saying that Shannon is operating unsafely, her



Shannon Smith

building does not have an occupancy permit and we need her to stop. So we’re going for an injunction so she does stop, and if she doesn’t, then it’s kind of a ‘contempt of court’ situation,” Sweet said.

“If she did have another event and we were able to show that, she would probably be in contempt of court and have to suffer some kind of penalty.”

Kearns delivered a response to Circuit Court Tuesday. He seeks to dismiss the case due to “lack of jurisdiction, failure to state a claim and another action is pending.” The city’s claims are “indefinite and uncertain,” he wrote, “and without legal basis.”

Kearns also seeks to dismiss Strickland from the charges. She has lived in Maryland since 2012, and is an owner of the barn “in name only.”

Hearing date for the injunction in Clatsop County Circuit Court is Dec. 10.

Salmon: It’s an ethical issue for some people

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year long. The engineers were able to keep the hormone active by using another gene from an eel-like fish called an ocean pout that acts like an “on” switch for the hormone. Typical Atlantic salmon produce the growth hormone for only part of the year.

The FDA has also said the fish is unlikely to harm the environment. The fish would be bred female and sterile, though a very small percentage might still be

able to breed. The company has argued the potential for escape is low.

There is no evidence that the foods would be unsafe, but for some people, it’s an ethical issue.

Some retailers have pledged not to sell the salmon, and it’s still unclear whether the public will have an appetite for the fish if it is approved. Genetic engineering is already widely used for crops, but the government until now has not considered allowing the

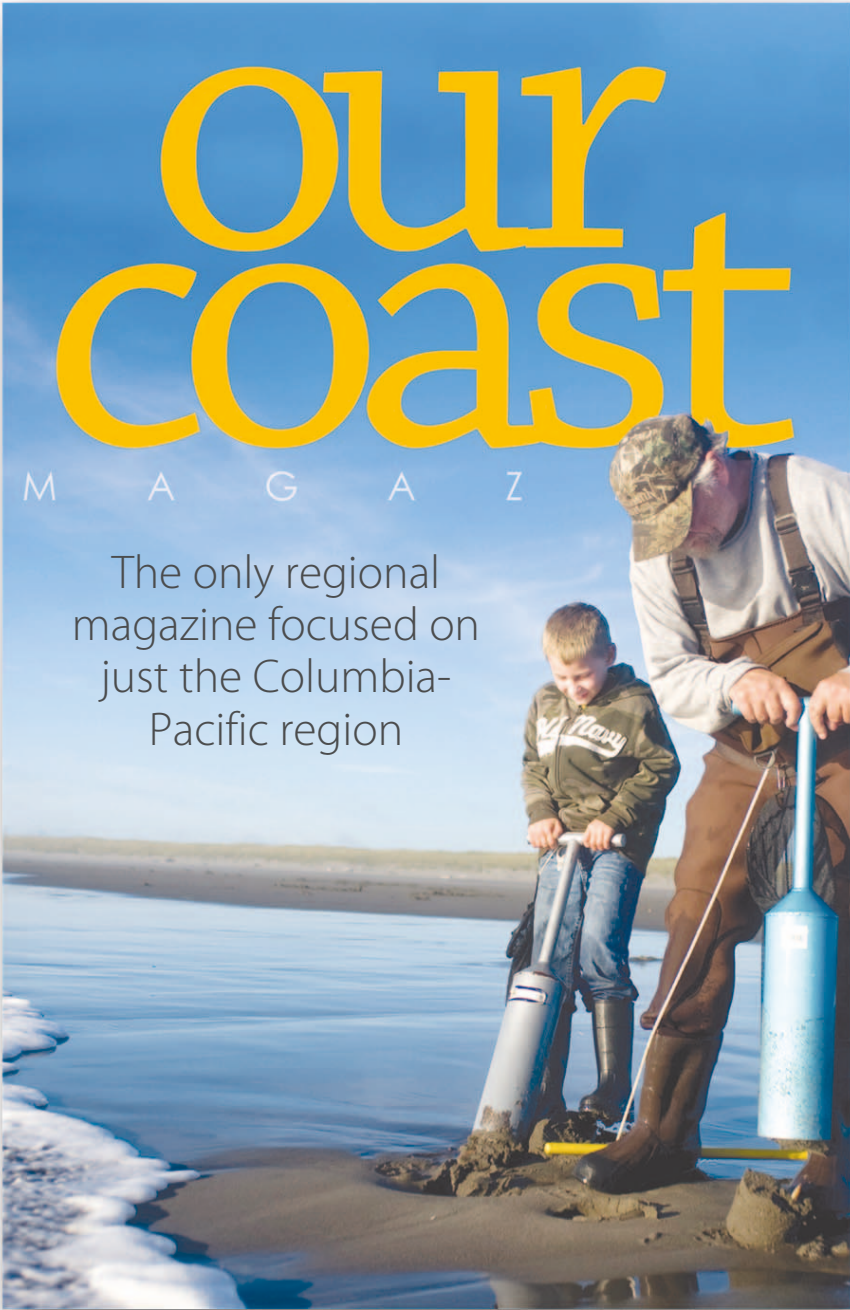
consumption of modified animals. Although the potential benefits and profits are huge, many people have qualms about manipulating the genetic code of other living creatures.

Critics call the modified salmon a “ Frankenfish.” They worry that it could cause human allergies and the eventual decimation of the natural salmon population if it escapes and breeds in the wild. Others believe breeding engineered animals is an ethical issue.

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