

Toxin: Domoic acid has also delayed two crab seasons

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Ecosystem 'shaken'

This bloom shut down more than razor clam digs.

By mid-August, the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife had closed 90 miles of the state's 157-mile-long outer coast to commercial and recreational crabbing. Millions of dollars were lost.

Domoic acid, a toxin produced by a certain type of phytoplankton, is known to cause severe brain damage and even death in sea lions and bird species that consume contaminated prey — and can do the same to humans. During the big bloom in 2015, scientists recorded the deaths of 30 large whales in the western Gulf of Alaska. It is suspected, though not certain, that domoic acid played a role in these deaths.

"The whole entire system was shaken," Lefebvre said.

Other blooms have come and gone since, even while the effects of that big bloom continue to ripple through the ecosystem.

Besides forcing state fishery managers to cancel several recreational clam dig openers in the past two years, domoic acid has also delayed the start of two commercial Dungeness crab seasons.

Earlier this year, researchers with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and other groups linked the massive bloom to ocean conditions, specifically the higher temperatures recorded at the time. Warm water creates a climate in which pathogens and diseases flourish, further complicating the picture.



Photos by Luke Whittaker/EO Media Group

Culinary students from Ilwaco High School served up fried clam fritter on a newer version of the "world's largest frying pan."

Lefebvre looks at how toxins such as domoic acid move through the food web, how they accumulate in species such as razor clams and, then, where this hits marine mammals and human health. As she and other researchers continue to see high levels of toxin persist in the water and in marine animals, they worry what it could mean for human populations.

Safety precautions

Oregon and Washington's safety precautions are stringent and a 20 parts per million threshold established in both

states for domoic acid levels in razor clams is conservative, an abundance of caution, say fishery managers.

Oregon recently regained funding to test water and see what phytoplankton is present, testing that helps fishery managers get a vague sense of what might be coming down the road. Washington has had this testing for years but Oregon has only had it sporadically. Both states' fish and wildlife departments test tissue samples in razor clams and crabs, as do the state departments that deter-

mine whether or not to close down razor clam digs: the Department of Agriculture in Oregon, and the Department of Health in Washington.

Instead, Lefebvre worries about people who harvest for themselves, and who may have traditional spots that don't fall within areas monitored regularly by the states.

"People need to be aware of more risk, even with traditional harvesting practices, as the food web is contaminated more often," she said. "Maybe their practices have been safe for many years. Things are changing."

High levels

Washington has had a bit more luck than Oregon this year, though not much.

Digs early in the season went ahead more or less as scheduled in Washington, but by March and April, fishery managers had canceled several digs due to high levels of domoic acid. Long Beach, a popular destination for diggers, didn't open at all until April 12.

Then, at the end of April, the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife gave razor clam diggers a six-day opening at several beaches,

and increased the daily limit from 15 to 25 clams at Long Beach.

"It really was some very extraordinary circumstances," said Department of Fish and Wildlife coastal shellfish manager Dan Ayres about the limit increase in Long Beach. Because nobody had been digging clams, there was an older population of very large clams available and Ayres said the department recognized that "the community had been deprived of the benefit of having razor clam diggers visit."

They couldn't offer more days, but they could offer more clams.

Then, on May 4, the Department of Fish and Wildlife closed two beaches — Long Beach and Twin Harbors — for the rest of the month when domoic acid levels shot back up again. Another beach closed after the state hit its quota there. On Tuesday, the state announced that all of Washington's beaches were closed to razor clam digging for the rest of the month, with levels of domoic acid high up and down the coast.

The reason Washington was able to open at all while Oregon remained closed is thanks in large part to the Columbia River, which can act as a sort of barrier between the states, Hunter said.

Phytoplankton drifts. Clumps of it may be in one spot and nowhere to be found a few miles away. It may be present and not producing domoic acid. Even with the barrier created by the Columbia River, it all comes down to what's in the water.

And what's in the water is complicated.



LEFT: Chefs shared samples of razor clam fritter with the crowd during the Razor Clam Festival in Long Beach at the end of April. MIDDLE: Ilwaco High School Juniors Adam Ruthford and Faith Headdress won the clam fritter cook-off with their mango and pineapple fritter with Caribbean sauce. RIGHT: Sales were brisk April 29 for licenses, boots, nets and clam guns at stores and gas stations along the Long Beach Peninsula. More photos online at DailyAstorian.com



Arch Cape: 'This council is drumming up all kinds of fear to get rid of us'

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County commissioners previously voted twice to dissolve the committee, and an appeal was filed with the state Land Use Board of Appeals.

The appeals board sent the decision back to the county, saying it did not provide public notice of a previous hearing in a newspaper of general circulation.

Testimony

The hourlong hearing Wednesday night included testimony from five people who disagreed with county staff's and most of the commissioners' characterizations of the design review committee.

Opponents have raised concerns about Arch Cape residents losing power to review lands in their community. But neighborhood associations and amendments to the county development code could provide review in the absence of the committee, Community Development Director Heather Hansen said.

"The issue before you tonight is not whether citizen involvement is important to the Clatsop County Board of Commissioners," Hansen said. "It's about the appropriate role for a county-appointed committee that advises on land use decisions."

County counsel Chris Cream said the county has been liable to legal ramifications because the committee has not followed procedural or public meetings rules. Commissioner Lianne

Thompson added she is one of multiple Arch Cape residents that has been confronted by members of the committee either in person or over the phone regarding various issues.

'Insulting'

Michael Manzulli, an attorney from Cannon Beach, said during public testimony that the committee is advisory in nature and makes no decisions. He called the charge that the committee did not follow legally mandated procedures "insulting."

"This council is drumming up all kinds of fear to get rid of us," he said. "This is a staff-driven mission to dismiss us, and it's really upsetting."

Tevis Dooley, a contractor from Arch Cape, presented commissioners with a petition in favor of the committee — formed in the 1970s — with 216 signatures and 94 comments.

County Commissioner Kathleen Sullivan, who represented the sole vote against the ordinance, said she hopes the county will find a way to keep the committee functioning.

"This organization has been existing a long time, and people seem like they want to work it out," Sullivan said. "I wish we could find a way to work it out."

Because commissioners did not reach unanimous agreement Wednesday, the committee has staved off elimination for another few weeks.

"The county is at fiscal risk," Commission Chairman Scott Lee said.

Moratorium: To be discussed at first June meeting

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The council's discussion was wide-ranging, including how legal homestay lodging rentals and illegal rentals affect housing options for people who live and work here; what it means for neighborhoods, especially since hosts using the popular rental website Airbnb sometimes rent out entire houses, bought just for that purpose; how these rentals provide money to residents living on fixed incomes or who are using the revenue from renting to tourists to fund work on their homes; whether or not the city could even enforce the rules it might impose; and asking what a moratorium actually could achieve since people running illegal rentals would likely continue to do so anyway.

In this, Astoria joins hundreds of cities around the country that are worried about the effects of Airbnb and similar companies and tourist rental practices on their communities.

A complication

For some city councilors, the fact that Community Development Director Kevin Cronin and his family operate a homestay rental out of their house complicates the discussion, and any possible solutions.

City Councilor Zetty Nemlowill said she didn't want to

embarrass anyone, but asked to be reminded why "our community development director isn't here and why our planner (Nancy Ferber) is here."

Cronin, on the advice of City Attorney Blair Henningsgaard and the Oregon Government Ethics Commission, cannot participate in any part of the homestay lodging project, including any code enforcement, review of permits or preparing new code language requested by the council since he could potentially benefit from the outcome. City Planner Nancy Ferber, with City Manager Brett Estes, led the work session instead.

"There's no secret there," Estes said of Cronin's absence.

Nemlowill said she would like to see illegal rentals brought into compliance and would be willing to allow homestays as currently outlined in city code, but that she worried about the Community Development Department's ability to do this work and enforce its code "with one of its major players out of the process."

"This is only a very small portion of her job," she said, indicating Ferber. "A very small portion of her job."

Currently, Nemlowill is

against allowing homestay rentals in Astoria. Councilor Cindy Price says she likely falls "somewhere between yes and no," but echoed Nemlowill's concerns about the city's, specifically the Community Development Department's, ability to enforce its own rules. The other councilors leaned more toward allowing homestay rentals, but advocated restricting what those rentals look like, enforcing city code and, as suggested by Councilor Bruce Jones, imposing steep fines on those who break the rules.

Owner present

The city's homestay lodging provision only allows people to temporarily rent up to two bedrooms of their house to tourists, a house they must also own and live in. While a guest is staying in one of these rooms, the owner must also be present. The city requires an owner to obtain a business license and pay lodging taxes to the city. But in 2015, with an estimated 40 active hosts each earning around \$6,500 a year through their rental activities, the city only received \$1,417 in taxes. By some estimates, it should have collected approximately \$22,000. Of the approximately 44 rentals that the city knows about now — those

staff and Price could find listed through websites like Airbnb and VRBO or those who have applied through the city — staff estimates more than a dozen are out of compliance.

"Really the question is to prohibit or not to prohibit," Ferber had told the council at the start of the meeting.

Either answer will require changes to city code and then a way to consistently enforce these changes. Currently, and across departments, code enforcement is based on complaints, and in the case of homestay lodging, complaints are sometimes not enough. It can be hard for staff to obtain and verify the information they need to determine if someone is breaking the rules.

Estes confirmed that the Finance Department, like the Community Development Department, "does not have the capacity to go and hunt down each individual."

Going forward with whatever the council decides, the city might have to look at additional resources such as contracting work out, said Estes, adding this is common across departments. Each department maintains a professional services budget.

The council expects to discuss the possibility of a moratorium with City Attorney Henningsgaard at its first meeting in June.



Kevin Cronin

Whale: 26,000 gray whales migrate off the West Coast

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Cascadia Research. Authorities are on the lookout for another gray whale first spotted off California that has its head stuck in a metal framework.

These incidents have

prompted increased efforts to identify solutions as well as help disentangle whales when encountered still alive, the scientists said. Another threat to whales was highlighted by a boat strike on a well-known adult

gray whale in Puget Sound, caught on video in April. Fortunately, that whale survived, though the full extent of its injuries are not yet known, researchers said.

There are an estimated 26,000 gray whales that migrate

off the West Coast, according to the World Wildlife Fund, which calls their recovery "a great conservation success story."

Gray whales were removed from the Endangered Species List in 1994.