

Abundance of clams awaits

By KATIE FRANKOWICZ
The Astorian

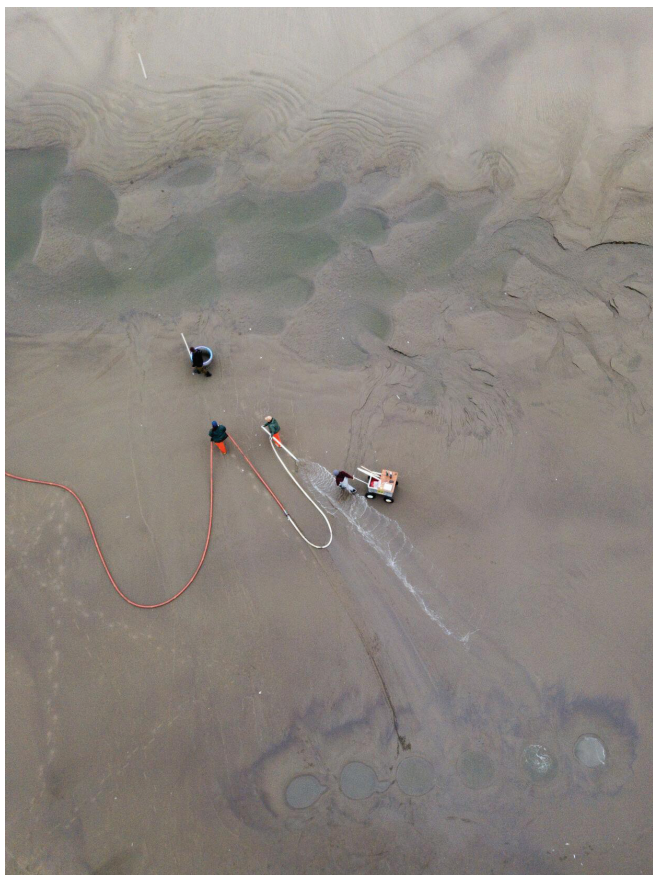
It's been nearly a year since someone could walk from a parking lot in Fort Stevens State Park to the wet sand by the South Jetty and shove a clam gun in a razor clam's face.

People are once again able to bring their tool of choice — be it shovel, clam gun, or their own two hands — to Oregon's most popular clamming beach to dig their daily limit.

The Clatsop beaches area shut down last year after marine toxin levels spiked. Domoic acid levels remained high into 2021 and an annual summer conservation closure period followed.

Now, toxin levels have dipped and ocean conditions were ideal for young and more mature clams. Razor clam abundance is the highest it has been since 2004, when the state first began assessing the population, according to fishery managers.

It's welcome news to clambers. The Clatsop beaches area, an 18-mile stretch of beach between Sea-



side and the South Jetty near the Columbia River, is home to productive clam beds. It is where the bulk of Oregon's razor clams are harvested each season.

There is a tremendous

amount of clams out on the beach, said Matt Hunter, the shellfish project leader with the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife's marine resources program.

Abundance is high in

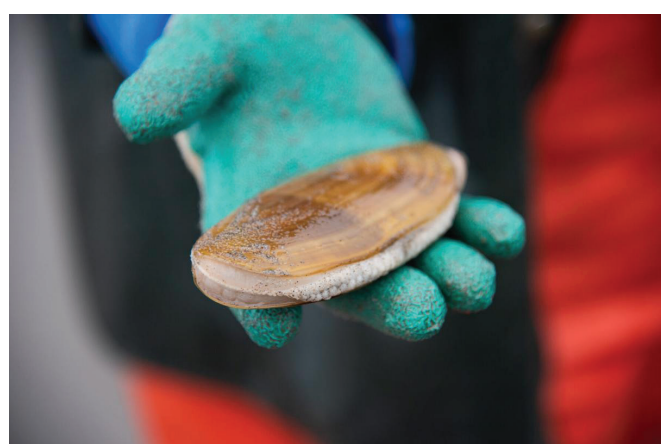
Washington state, as well — so high, in fact, that fishery managers there increased the daily bag limit from the first 15 clams dug to the first 20. In Oregon, the daily bag limit continues to be the first 15 clams dug.

Washington enforcement officials have written a number of citations for people who went over the limit, but Dan Ayres, the coastal shellfish manager for the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, said he has had other people tell him "20 clams was too many and they just took what they could eat."

The department has only changed bag limits once before in Ayres' long time with the state.

Several years ago, they allowed people to keep up to 25 clams in Long Beach. A preseason assessment predicted the beach would be full of clams, but the area hadn't been open for months because of issues with domoic acid. When people finally began to dig in the spring, people struggled to dig even the usual 15. Many clams hadn't survived.

That won't be a problem this year, Ayres said.



Photos by Hailey Hoffman/The Astorian

ABOVE: Razor clam digging reopened on the Clatsop beaches area last Friday. LEFT: Biologists pull up razor clams to check size and abundance on Clatsop beaches in July during an annual conservation closure.

But the naturally occurring marine toxin remains a treat. Levels may not be at unsafe levels right now, but blooms can occur in the early fall and fishery managers saw levels fluctuate throughout the summer.

In recent years, domoic acid has not only shut down razor clam digs, it has impacted the Dungeness crab fishery.

Recent stormy weather likely spelled good news for the start of the razor clam season. Ayres said the wind and rain appears to have cleared up the water.

"It's looking better now than it did before," he said.

In Oregon, Hunter will be looking at weekly water samples taken from up and down the coast, keeping an eye on pseudo-nitzschia in the water. The planktonic diatom can produce domoic acid and is becoming a familiar, near-constant presence in the water column, Hunter said.

"I think this is going to be our new normal with changing oceans and a changing climate," he said.

If the two states don't see any harmful algal blooms in the early fall, it is rare for them to experience any issues through the winter. They will start worrying about domoic acid again in the spring.

School districts struggle with lack of bus drivers

By ETHAN MYERS
The Astorian

School superintendents in Clatsop County are sounding the alarm about a lack of school bus drivers.

The labor shortage comes as coronavirus protocols limit the number of students that can be on a bus at once, increasing the pressure to find more drivers. Between the five school districts, they need nine bus drivers, Knappa Superintendent Bill Fritz said.

Knappa school bus

Knappa and other school districts are in need of bus drivers.

Fritz and Astoria Superintendent Craig Hoppes said they have been able to make ends meet to start the school year, but the lack of backup drivers is concerning.

Although Knappa has yet to make cuts to routes or see long delays, Fritz said, "it's only a matter of time unless we can get some drivers."

In September, a joint request was made on behalf of superintendents in Astoria, Knappa, Warrenton and Seaside to the Oregon Office of Emergency Management asking for school bus drivers, which could result in the Oregon National Guard stepping in to help.

"Unless they are able to get permanent-type drivers ... it's just going to be a Band-Aid until we can get more drivers," Hoppes said.

The Warrenton-Hammond School District does not have a major shortage,

Superintendent Tom Rogozinski said, but is running a little thin due to increased routes from the addition of Warrenton Middle School.

Jewell Superintendent Steve Phillips said that as a rural school district, it is always tough to find school bus drivers, but the district does not have an immediate need and did not join the countywide request.

School districts expect to lose some workers because of Gov. Kate Brown's vaccine mandate on teachers and other school staff. But the school bus driver shortage is largely rooted in another challenge — commercial driver's licenses.

School bus drivers need more training than most truck drivers, but with a commercial driver's license, they can likely make more money elsewhere, Fritz said.

"The level of training is complicated and the price point is difficult for us to match," he said. "I would say our cargo is more precious."

While issues surrounding commercial driver's licenses seem to be the driving factor in the shortage, Fritz sees other things at play.

"I think there are some people who are averse to working in close quarters with people right now due to COVID ... While bus driv-

ing is very rewarding work, because you get to make a difference in your community, it is also very challenging work," he said. "You're trying to safely get students to and from school in a large piece of mechanical equipment and you're trying to manage the kids at the same time."

"Some people have the gift for doing that, and they do it very well, and they really make a difference in kids' lives. But it can be very stressful."

In an effort to recruit more drivers, Knappa added a \$500 signing bonus. Astoria provided bus drivers and classified staff with a 10% wage increase this school year, Hoppes said.

As the school districts wait to hear back from the state, superintendents have looked at alternatives.

"One of the things that has been very helpful — is we advertised throughout the last month that if parents can take their kids to school and pick them up, to please do so," Hoppes said. "A lot of parents have called in and said, 'Hey, I can take care of it. I know you guys are strapped by drivers and not a lot of seats.'"

"But that's mainly it. There are not a lot of other options."



R.J. Marx

Testing for the coronavirus at Providence Seaside Hospital.

Local hospitals work to vaccinate staff against virus

By ERICK BENGEL
The Astorian

Administrators at Columbia Memorial Hospital and Providence Seaside Hospital believe most hospital staff will be vaccinated against the coronavirus by the state's deadline for health care workers in mid-October.

More than 80% of caregivers at Columbia Memorial have received a COVID-19 vaccine.

The state has set an Oct. 18 deadline for health care workers, teachers and other school staff to get vaccinated against the coronavirus.

The Astoria hospital expects more staff to get their second doses over the next week, Jarrod Karnofski, the vice president of Columbia Memorial's ancillary and support services, said at a news conference hosted by the Clatsop County Public Health Department on Wednesday.

At Providence Seaside, about 85% of caregivers have been vaccinated, according to Jason Plamondon, the hospital's chief nursing officer, who was not at the news conference but answered questions via email.

Gov. Kate Brown has set an Oct. 18 deadline for health care workers, teachers and other school staff to be vaccinated. The Oregon Health Authority allows for exemptions for religious and medical reasons.

GOV. KATE BROWN HAS SET AN OCT. 18 DEADLINE FOR HEALTH CARE WORKERS, TEACHERS AND OTHER SCHOOL STAFF TO BE VACCINATED. THE OREGON HEALTH AUTHORITY ALLOWS FOR EXEMPTIONS FOR RELIGIOUS AND MEDICAL REASONS.

Columbia Memorial anticipates that "a fair number" of unvaccinated staff will request exemptions to the vaccine mandate, Karnofski said.

"We have already been working on a process internally to evaluate those religious and medical exceptions, and approving or denying those exceptions per the Oregon Health Authority guidelines," he said.

Columbia Memorial is hopeful, he said, that it won't have many caregivers without a vaccine or approved exemption by the deadline.

Providence Seaside is seeing "a few" workers asking for exemptions, Plamondon said.

Columbia Memorial and Providence Seaside are among the region's largest

employers, so if even a fraction of hospital staff remains unvaccinated by the deadline, it could mean dozens of workers could lose their jobs for refusing a vaccine.

Hospitalizations linked to the virus peaked on the North Coast during the late summer as the delta variant led to a record number of new virus cases. But local hospitalizations have fallen over the past few weeks.

Columbia Memorial has reopened its same-day services unit — used for a time as a special COVID unit — and is doing elective surgeries again.

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