



Shellfishing closures could be lifted by next week

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Harvesting these tasty bivalves has been banned in some waters off Massachusetts.

By Matt Rocheleau

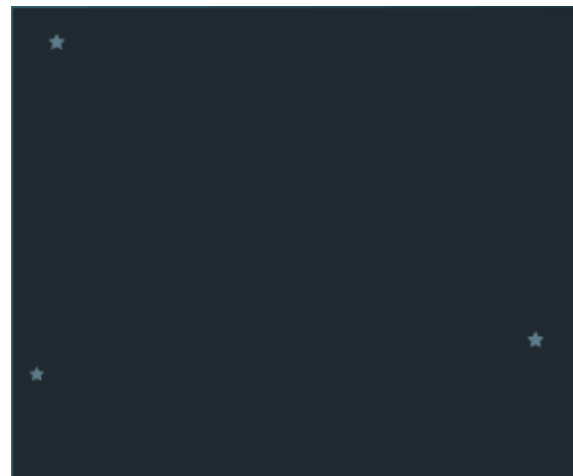
GLOBE STAFF OCTOBER 28, 2016

Massachusetts officials said they hope to soon reopen large swaths of ocean along the state's coast that have been closed to shellfishing for weeks. Shellfishermen have their fingers crossed, too.

"It's had a very large economic impact, and it's put people's livelihoods at stake," said Stephen Wright, co-owner of the Chatham Shellfish Co. and a board member of the Massachusetts Aquaculture Association.

"We're losing out on a lot of business," he said. "I've managed to keep my employees here on a limited basis," employing a skeleton crew for the past couple of weeks.

Wright said he worries that if reopenings are delayed a week or two later than state officials expect, he might have to lay off some workers.



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Rhode Island and Maine have also been grappling with shellfishing shutdowns.

Most of the closures across all three states have been caused by unprecedented levels of toxic algae. One area, off of Wellfleet, was closed because of a separate issue, norovirus.

Michael Hickey, who oversees shellfish sanitation and management for the Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries, said recent test results have shown improved water conditions, and officials are awaiting further tests with the hope they will clear the way for reopenings next week.



“We have to have a series of good tests and a good trend line before that can happen,” Hickey said.

Closures in Massachusetts began Oct. 7, with the shutdowns expanding to other areas within a few days. The shutdowns affect waters along the south coast of Cape Cod, including the islands of Martha’s Vineyard and Nantucket.

Rhode Island’s closures began about the same time.

Closures in Maine, which also prompted a [recall of shellfish there](#), began in late September.

The naturally occurring algae causing most of the closures across New England is called Pseudo-nitzschia.

Hickey said that while the algae has cropped up before in small amounts, “This is the first time we’ve had a big enough bloom that’s caused closures.”

“It’s just huge numbers of these organisms that no one’s ever seen before,” he said.

The algae can produce a biotoxin, called domoic acid, that certain types of shellfish can absorb.

If humans eat the tainted shellfish, they can be poisoned and suffer a wide range of symptoms.

Effects include vomiting, nausea, and diarrhea. In severe cases, there can be neurological symptoms such as permanent memory loss. People can even fall into a coma or die from such poisoning.

“That’s why the state was so quick to jump on this and issue the closures,” Hickey said.

The norovirus issue in Wellfleet was discovered when people started getting sick after eating shellfish from that area. That prompted an automatic 21-day closure on Oct. 13, and also led to a recall of shellfish harvested from that area.

It also meant disappointment for mollusk lovers. [No raw oysters were served at the annual Wellfleet OysterFest](#) earlier this month.



Humans who eat norovirus-infected shellfish can develop vomiting, nausea, diarrhea, fever, and aches. The infected seafood can also cause death in severe cases, primarily for young children and older people.

Hickey said other short-term closures have resulted from more routine causes, including this past weekend, when heavy rain fell, which can lead to runoff from land that can contaminate shellfish beds.

“We’ve got two major events here going on simultaneously on top of all the things that go on normally,” he said. “It’s put a strain on resources in the shellfish industry.”

The primary effect within the industry has been on those who work on the front lines in the affected areas.

“As far as the harvesters and growers go, they’re kind of out of luck until this whole thing is over with,” Hickey said. “They worry about losing market share — that whoever they were supplying has found a new source and that they may not be able to get back to the level they were selling at before.”

He said a ripple effect of concern has swept throughout the industry, even though other parts of the industry haven’t taken a big hit so far. Wholesalers and retailers, for example, have been able to turn to other sources for shellfish.

Once shellfishing reopens, state officials said they will work with local shellfishermen to estimate the financial effect of the closures.

Katie Gronendyke, spokeswoman for the Massachusetts Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs, said state officials will continue to monitor the situation to determine if Governor Charlie Baker’s administration has grounds to petition for federal money that can be distributed as relief aid to local shellfishermen.

She said the norovirus closure in Wellfleet would not be eligible for such assistance, but the algae-caused closures might qualify.

“The Baker-Polito administration is committed to the individuals, families, and communities who rely upon the viability of the Commonwealth’s recreational and commercial fishing industries,” Gronendyke said.


Massachusetts shellfishermen have received reimbursements for closures before, including for shutdowns prompted by red tide in 2005, when \$1.9 million was distributed, and in 2008, when \$1.2 million in aid was distributed.

Wright said he hopes the string of closures doesn't cause consumers to shy away from eating shellfish.

“Any shellfish that's on the market is safe for consumption,” he said. “It's a very well-regulated industry.”

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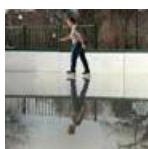
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