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SHELLFISH HARVESTERS URGED NOT TO GATHER OR CONSUME
SHELLFISH FROM CLOSED AREAS

The Executive Office of Environmental Affairs reminds commercial shellfish harvesters, aquaculture operators, and especially recreational shellfishermen and people on vacation in Massachusetts that the harvest of shellfish along most of Massachusetts coastal waters is prohibited due to a toxic red tide outbreak.

"We want to get the word out to recreational shellfishermen, people on vacation, casual beachcombers, and anglers that might gather and consume shellfish that the red tide outbreak is serious and consumption of shellfish from closed areas can cause severe illness and even death," said Massachusetts Environmental Affairs Secretary Ellen Roy Herzfelder. "While it is not safe to harvest shellfish from closed areas, we do want consumers to know that the product in markets and restaurants is safe as it is harvested from open areas mostly outside of Massachusetts."

Red tide is a toxic algae that accumulates in shellfish and causes paralytic shellfish poisoning (PSP) when consumed by humans. After ingestion, this poison immediately affects the nervous system, with symptoms usually occurring within 30 minutes. Initial reactions are tingling of the lips and tongue, which spreads to the face, neck, fingertips and toes. Headache, dizziness and nausea follow. Severity depends on the amount of toxin consumed. In severe cases, muscular paralysis and respiratory difficulty may occur within five to 12 hours. Fatalities from respiratory paralysis have been reported.

During red tide blooms, hard-shell clams, soft-shell clams, oysters, mussels, carnivorous snails, periwinkles, conchs, whelks, and moon snails harvested from areas affected by the blooms are not safe to eat.

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Lobster meat, crabs, shrimp, and most finfish do not normally accumulate toxin and are safe to eat from affected waters. Lobster tomalley (the green part or liver) is not safe to eat, particularly during red tide events because this part of the lobster can build up high levels of toxins and other pollutants. ***Shellfish should never be harvested from closed areas. Toxic shellfish will taste and appear no different than nontoxic shellfish, and cooking does not destroy the red tide toxin.*** Testing is the only way to determine if shellfish contain unsafe levels of toxin.

Recreational shellfish gatherers should look for posted warnings and pay close attention to local media announcements. Also, it is advisable to contact appropriate state agencies and local shellfish constables for current news on closures.

The red tide outbreak is being monitored in Massachusetts by the Division of Marine Fisheries (DMF), which is responsible for year round testing of coastal waters and prohibiting harvest in affected areas. DMF is working closely with the Department of Public Health, NOAA Fisheries, and the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution in monitoring and testing, and the agency immediately notifies affected city and town officials of closures. When red tide blooms subside, shellfish purify themselves of the toxin, and when testing indicates a return to safe levels, the areas will be reopened.

The Massachusetts Environmental Police and local shellfish constables are responsible for enforcing the laws related to shellfish harvest. Officials have noted excellent compliance among commercial shellfish harvesters and aquaculture operators and want to make sure that recreational shellfishermen are aware of the red tide outbreak and do not harvest shellfish from closed areas.

Additional information about red tide, including particulars about closures, is available at the following WEB sites:

http://www.mass.gov/dfwele/dmf/programsandprojects/psp_notice.htm#shelsani

<http://www.mass.gov/dph/fpp/redtide.htm>

<http://www.whoi.edu/>

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