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## **Farmers Cheer Recommended Opening of Portage Bay Shellfish Beds**

*Improving water quality allows Department of Health to keep shellfish beds open for harvest during most of year*

(LYNDEN, WA) Harvest in the Lummi Nation's Portage Bay shellfish beds is now possible for most of the year thanks to improving water quality. The state Department of Health recently announced that the shellfish beds are meeting standards to allow reopening during the important April-through-June period, in addition to the three months before and after. This follows the reopening of the Drayton Harbor shellfish beds in late 2016.

"This is great news," said Whatcom Family Farmers board president Brad Rader. "It's wonderful news for the Lummi harvesters who have had their shellfish harvest restricted. When farmers formed the Portage Bay Partnership with the Lummi leaders, they made it clear they were committed to continued hard work on addressing potential contamination from farms, but also from all sources of contamination. This shows that commitment is paying off."

The three months of continued closure are the rainy months of the year, when rains flush bacteria from a variety of sources into the bay. "We believe it will be possible in the future to have year-round openings," said Portage Bay Shellfish Advisory Committee member Fred Likkel. Fred also serves as Whatcom Family Farmers' Executive Director and water quality expert for the Whatcom County Watershed Improvement Districts (WIDS).

Likkel noted the action by many farmers to help protect water quality. "No doubt we have seen strong progress and we want to acknowledge the great work done by so many of our farmers to protect water quality," Likkel said. "But we will not rest until we are certain contamination from farms is further reduced or eliminated."

Likkel also said the improved water quality and expanded openings required a lot of effort from many partners. "The Conservation District is an extremely important part of these efforts," Likkel said, "Whatcom County from the County Executive to the various staff involved in water quality, Lynden and Ferndale city staff, and the Department of Ecology all have worked with farmers and tribal officials to address the various causes of bacteria contamination."

The 810 acres of shellfish beds in Blaine's Drayton Harbor opened in late 2016. Likkel pointed to this along with the Portage Bay expanded openings as examples of community-wide teamwork. The Washington State Department of Health monitors the fecal coliform levels in water quality in the shellfish

beds to ensure that shellfish harvested is safe to eat. Fecal coliform refers to a variety of human, animal and naturally-occurring bacteria. As shellfish filter the water for food, their systems are particularly sensitive to the accumulation of bacteria which can then pose health problems for consumers.

In the two years since the Portage Bay Partnership was formed, farmers note a number of positive developments:

- Water quality has markedly improved with 80% of the sites tested showing improvement in the last year; most are now meeting water quality standards.
- There is more monitoring and analysis being done by various government agencies than ever.
- Over 5200 water quality samples have been analyzed in the last year alone.  
Inspection protocols involving dairy farms are more focused than ever on high risk application times — those times of the year when rainy weather can allow manure to runoff and when crop growth isn't sufficient to take up the nutrients.
- Inspections by fly-overs is now happening routinely during wet weather events.
- Septic systems are now more routinely checked.
- Canadian contributions, where large flushes of contaminants entering our streams from the north are known to impact shellfish beds, are beginning to be addressed through a transboundary working group.
- While an EPA DNA source study showed no sign of cattle markers in water entering Bellingham Bay, farmers have worked hard to secure funding for additional DNA testing to find out more precisely the animal sources contributing to water quality concerns. That testing is now being conducted.
- Farmer partners through the six Whatcom County Watershed Improvement Districts, have successfully lobbied the Whatcom Conservation District and the Washington Conservation Commission for funding to support Portage Bay shellfish bed improvements, helping secure approximately \$250,000 in funding.

Whatcom Family Farmers was formed in mid-2015 as the unified public outreach arm of the Watershed Improvement Districts and the Whatcom County Dairy Federation. It is an independent affiliate of Save Family Farming which includes affiliates in Skagit County and Eastern Washington.

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