

THE 2004 FISHERY

Preseason Planning

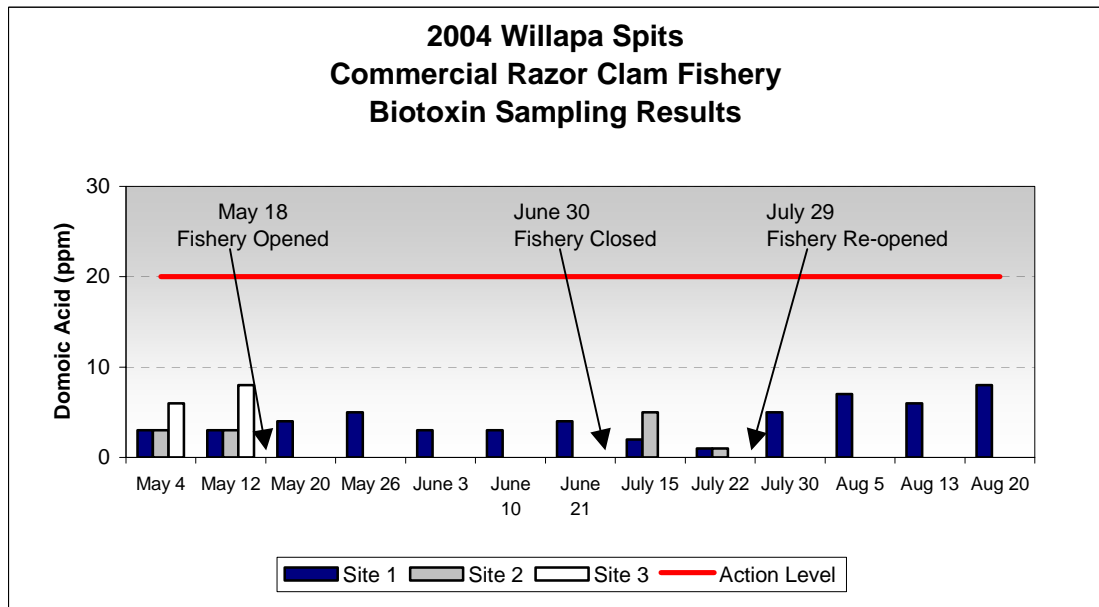
In 2004, letters were sent to license holders from the previous year to announce the tentative scheduling of the commercial fishery. The season, contingent on acceptable biotoxin levels, was set to open mid-May. Opening the commercial fishery at the Willapa Spits also required receipt of an Aquatic Lands Right of Entry Agreement from the Department of Natural Resources.

Razor clams were collected for biotoxin testing from three locations around the spits beginning in early May. Testing indicated low levels of domoic acid and the season opened on May 18.

Season, Landings and Biotoxin Sampling

The 2004 season progressed without interruption to its scheduled closure on June 30 (Figure 2). A combination of abundant clams and good low tides created excellent digging conditions. Landings for the six-week season totaled nearly 132,000 pounds, surpassing the record amount dug in 2002. During the season, the number of diggers averaged 31 per day, and on average, each digger landed 106 pounds of clams or the equivalent of 32 recreational limits (a recreational limit is 15 clams).

Figure 1. Commercial Razor Clam Fishery Biotoxin Results, 2004.



Following the closure of the initial season, staff and industry discussion prompted a request to re-open the spits to digging. The request, supported by indications of high

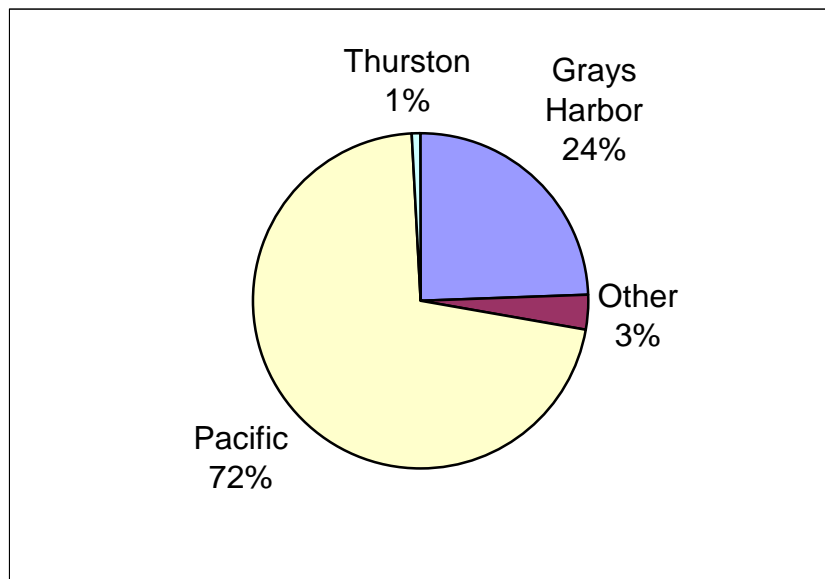
abundance, a strong market, and interest by diggers was approved, and the spits opened on July 29 for another four weeks. Although effort was lighter as some diggers moved on to other fishing opportunities, landings for this period were also good, totaling 48,000 pounds (Table 2).

Table 1. 2004 Number of pounds and days fished per month

Month	Days Fished	Pounds Harvested
May	11	33,849
June	30	98,119
July	3	8,914
August	24	38,848
Total	68	179,730

In total, the fishery landed 179,700 pounds of razor clams with an ex-vessel value over \$270,000. Despite the exceptional production, the ex-vessel price per pound of \$1.50 held steady for the duration of the two openers. During the first opener, 102 diggers participated in the fishery; another 12 diggers obtained licenses for the second opener. As in past years, buyers and diggers were predominantly residents of Pacific and Grays Harbor counties (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Residence of Commercial Razor Clams Diggers by County



Natural Mortality Research Project

In 2004, razor clam managers began a multi-year project to refine the harvest rate used for the recreational fishery. Working with research staff, managers developed a study to determine the rate of natural mortality for this species. This key piece of information was needed to evaluate adjustments to the recreational harvest rate.

Utilizing long-standing “reserves” set aside at each beach for research, the study required intensive stock assessment of each reserve, to be followed immediately by the removal (harvest) of up to 40% of the clams from half of each site. The reserves are one-quarter of a mile long, at half of that, the study area to be dug was only one-eighth of a mile.

Within in this relatively small stretch of beach, between 13,000 and 17,000 clams had to be dug in as little time as possible.

Although, commercial digging had not occurred on an ocean beach since 1969, to achieve this level of removal, WDFW managers sought the assistance of commercial razor clam buyers and diggers.

Local buyers were free to take part in the project, but had to agree to purchase clams on-site. Since all diggers were required to register with a buyer, the buyers were also asked to recruit and coordinate digger involvement. Two companies: Blue Heron’s Finest of Bay Center and Petit and Sons of South Bend agreed to participate and were of great assistance to the project.



Two experimental digs were scheduled: one at Long Beach, July 1, 2 and 3 and one at Twin Harbors Beach on August 31 and September 1. Digging was allowed each day for a period of four hours.

All clams were individually counted, and count per pound and length frequency data were collected from a sub-samples at each beach.

Since, ocean beaches are not certified by the Department of Health for the commercial harvest of shellfish, approval was granted for a “bait-only” fishery. As a result, all clams were dipped on-site in a non-toxic fluorescent dye to prevent any product from entering the human food market.



Total harvest for the five days was nearly 3,600 pounds with an exvessel value of about \$5,400. At Long Beach 13,591 clams were dug, meeting the project goal for this site. The goal was not met at Twin Harbors where about 5,000 clams were dug under less favorable conditions.

Full details of this project will be covered in a separate report.

