

Samish Bay Shellfish Area Classification

Department of Health's Role

We are responsible for ensuring that harvested shellfish are safe to eat. We do this by following national standards with oversight by the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA). If we fail to apply the FDA standards, public health is at risk, and the shellfish industry is prohibited from shipping product to other states. Another agency goal is keeping shellfish areas open whenever shellfish are safe to eat.

Classification of Growing Areas

Clean growing waters are essential because shellfish filter the water, concentrate contaminants from the water, and are often eaten raw or lightly cooked. Clean growing waters help us assure shellfish is safe to eat. FDA requires shellfish growing areas to be classified based on three things:

1. Routine testing of the marine water for fecal coliform bacteria. Samish Bay is sampled monthly at 26 locations (see map on back),
2. Evaluation of shoreline pollution sources, and
3. Understanding of how weather and water movement distributes pollutants.

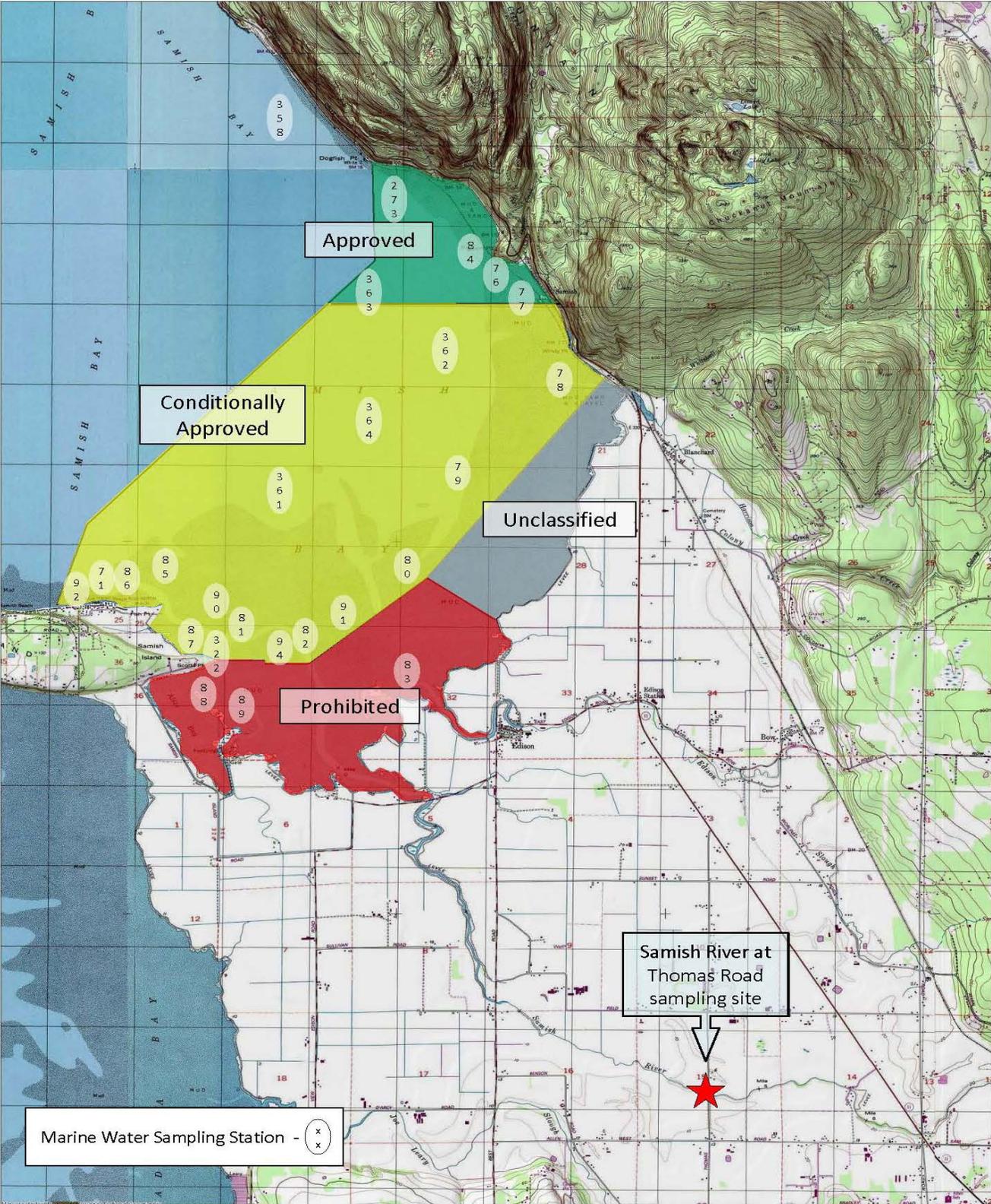
Changes in Classification

- In 2002, the department classified all of Samish Bay as “Approved”.
- In 2008, Skagit County found extremely high fecal coliform (fc) levels in the Samish River after a large rain storm (17,000 fc/100ml found, standard is 100). We closed the bay for a week as an “emergency closure” as prescribed by FDA rules.
- Also in 2008, the county began sampling the Samish River at Thomas Road (see map) during storm events.
- Since 2008, the county’s sampling continues to show that the river can have extremely high fecal coliform levels after rain storms, especially in the spring and November. Fecal coliform tests confirm that the bay is polluted when the river has high bacterial loads.
- From 2008 - 2011, we continued to use the “emergency closure” rule to close the bay when river samples showed 4.7 trillion fecal coliform had entered the bay in one day.
- By April 2011, we can finally predict when water quality is out of compliance. The FDA allows two classifications for frequently closed areas: (1) “Conditionally Approved” where poor water quality conditions are predictable; or (2) “Prohibited,” which means the bay is permanently closed. We chose to reclassify about 4,000 of 4,700 acres in Samish Bay from “Approved” to “Conditionally Approved.”

Current Status

- Samish Bay is open for harvest **unless** river samples show that 4.7 trillion fecal coliform enter into the bay in one day.
- As of May 1 of 2011, there have been two 6-day closures (Jan 6, March 30), a 5-day closure (April 26) and a 6-day flood closure (Jan 13).
- We can upgrade Samish Bay to “Approved” when it’s clear that the bay will not have more than one closure per year.

Samish Bay Sampling Locations



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