

State agency releases plan for cleaning up Samish Bay

By WHITNEY PIPKIN
Staff Writer

The Puget Sound Partnership on Tuesday released a 10-point action plan to hasten the clean-up of Samish Bay and the river and tributaries that drain into it.

The Samish Bay became a focal point of Gov. Chris Gregoire's cleanup plan after 4,000 acres of commercial shellfish beds in the bay were recently downgraded to conditionally approved for harvest.

The Puget Sound Partnership is a state agency created by the governor to clean up and restore the Puget Sound by 2020.

Gregoire has directed the state agency to work more closely with local officials to make "significant progress" toward cleaning up the bay in the next six months.

The local cleanup effort has been ongoing for more than three years, and has involved efforts to reduce the amount of septic, farm and wildlife waste that pollutes the watershed by improving septic systems at homes and manure management systems at farms and raising awareness about how to keep the waters clean.

Gregoire said at a meeting in April those efforts "were not enough."

Measures in the action plan include designating the Samish Basin as a marine recovery area, which will result in additional inspections of all septic systems. The plan also recruits several state agencies to help with additional inspections, some of which will target areas thought to be contributing most to the pollution.

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The plan also includes providing "sani-cans" for hunters and anglers who otherwise don't have access to restroom facilities. The agency plans to further look at how much impact local waterfowl and wildlife have on levels of fecal coliform in the Samish River and the bay.

Shellfish growers and some local officials welcome the additional help, while others feel their efforts have been slow, yet effective, so far.

"We have a serious pollution problem in the Samish watershed that continues to threaten our livelihood, recreation, shellfish beds and quality of life," Skagit County Commissioner Ron Wesen said in a statement. "We have had a good program in place, but we welcome the extra help and added manpower to address this issue."

There are three commercial shellfish growers operating in Samish Bay. The state Department of Health has closed the bay at least 30 times for multiple days over the past three years due to

the presence of fecal coliform, an indicator of harmful bacteria. The contaminant is washed into the bay at higher levels after heavy rains.

The Washington Dairy Products Commission released a statement Tuesday that dairy farmers in the area plan to continue to cooperate with cleanup efforts.

Bill Dewey, spokesman for Taylor Shellfish Farms, which operates in Samish Bay and throughout the Puget Sound, said the seven dairy farms in the Samish watershed have been leaders in aiding the cleanup effort. Dairy farmers often abide by stringent manure management plans overseen by the state Department of Agriculture.

"If we had the same response from everyone else that we've had from dairy farmers, we'd be in a far better situation," Dewey said in the statement.

See the action plan at: www.psp.wa.gov/downloads/samish/SamishActionAgendaFinal.pdf.

■ Whitney Pipkin can be reached at 360-416-2112 or wpipkin@skagitpublishing.com. Follow her on Twitter at www.twitter.com/biz_svh.