

CHRISTINE O. GREGOIRE
Governor



STATE OF WASHINGTON
OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR

P.O. Box 40002 • Olympia, Washington 98504-0002 • (360) 902-4111

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Media Contact: Governor's Communications

Phone: 360-902-4136

Gov. Gregoire announces new initiative to create jobs, restore Puget Sound

Washington Shellfish Initiative promotes clean water and creation of jobs in state's aquaculture industry

OLYMPIA – Gov. Chris Gregoire today unveiled the Washington Shellfish Initiative, an agreement among federal and state government, tribes, and the shellfish industry to restore and expand Washington's shellfish resources to promote clean-water commerce and create family wage jobs.

"Few people realize how important the shellfish industry is to Washington state, and the potential for job growth," Gregoire said. "This industry already brings in tens of millions of dollars to our state every year – and demand for Washington's prized shellfish has long exceeded supply both nationally and globally. We have a unique opportunity to create good, living-wage jobs – but it will require clean water and partnership to grow this critical industry."

Washington's aquaculture industry – farmed clams, mussels and oysters – is worth more than \$107 million a year. The industry employs more than 3,200 people and pumps more than \$270 million annually into the state economy.

Gregoire announced her new initiative at Taylor Shellfish Farms in Shelton, joined by National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Administrator Dr. Jane Lubchenco, Brig. Gen. John McMahon, Northwestern Division Commander for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and representatives from local governments, tribes and the shellfish industry.

Gregoire's initiative calls for:

- Expanding, promoting and improving shellfish aquaculture in Washington;
- Increasing opportunities for and improving access to public tidelands for recreational shellfish harvesting;
- Restoring native shellfish habitat and populations such as the Olympia oyster and pinto abalone; and
- Improving and protecting water quality to help ensure healthy and safe shellfish for consumers.

To reach the initiative's goals, Gregoire intends to provide \$2 million in federal funds to local governments in Puget Sound to create pollution identification and correction programs. The grants will fix residential septic systems and address runoff from livestock and pet manure, as well as boat holding tanks.

Gregoire also plans to distribute \$1 million in federal grants to help local health departments in the 12 counties that border the Sound identify, inspect and fix failing septic systems and another \$1.5 million to help prevent manure from reaching area shellfish beds.

To address ocean acidity – which harms the ability of shellfish to grow or repair shells – Gregoire is creating a blue ribbon panel of scientific experts, government agencies, tribes, shellfish growers and others to provide recommendations to address the growing problem in Washington's marine waters.

For more detailed information on the Washington Shellfish Initiative, visit:

www.psp.wa.gov/shellfish.php

“The Washington Shellfish Initiative is critically important for our citizens, our cultural and tribal heritage, and our economy and the health of our marine waters,” said Gregoire. “Shellfish have always been an essential part of who we are as Washingtonians. Our shellfish industry helps sustain our families and communities – their operations become part of the ecology in many of our bays and inlets. Wild and farmed shellfish need unspoiled water to be healthy and viable – and Washington's shellfish growers have been advocates for clean water for more than 65 years.”

The state's goals for farmed and wild shellfish are in line with NOAA's goals outlined in the National Shellfish Initiative. To support the state's new initiative, NOAA Administrator Lubchenco announced a \$200,000 grant to help Washington restore the native Olympia oyster.

The Olympia oyster once ranged from Baja California to Alaska – including Puget Sound and our outer coast. During the past century, however, populations of the native oyster declined significantly due to industrial water pollution, silt from upland development, and overharvesting.

“The Washington Shellfish Initiative is the first regional implementation of a national effort to increase the commercial production of shellfish and restore native shellfish habitats and populations,” said Lubchenco. “NOAA's contribution today supports an ambitious partnership to rebuild native Olympia oysters and to regain the important ecological, cultural, and economic benefits from a viable, sustainable shellfish industry in the Pacific Northwest.”

“The Corps is actively participating in the Shellfish Interagency Permitting Program team along with government representatives from numerous agencies,” said McMahon. “The team is looking at ways to reduce redundancies, provide clarity on the permit review processes, and streamline the review process where appropriate, while maintaining appropriate environmental protection.”

Work is already under way to improve water quality and protect critical habitat. The Puget Sound Partnership's goal is a net increase of 10,800 harvestable shellfish acres in Puget Sound – including 7,000 acres where harvest is currently prohibited.

“Whether it's the shellfish we eat in Samish Bay or other parts of Puget Sound, success requires collaboration,” said Gerry O'Keefe, Executive Director for the Puget Sound Partnership. “The Partnership works across jurisdictional and political boundaries to set priorities, spur action and provide accountability for effective outcomes.”

“Shellfish have always been an important part of tribal culture here in Western Washington,” said Billy Frank, Jr, chairman, Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission. “This initiative will help protect and restore shellfish by increasing accountability for activities that pollute shellfish beds and threaten our treaty rights. As co-managers, the treaty Indian tribes stand ready to work with our state, federal, and local partners, the shellfish industry and others to accomplish the goals of this initiative.”

David Steele, President of the Pacific Coast Shellfish Growers Association said: “We applaud the State and National Shellfish Initiatives and the promotion of our sustainable industry. Our hope is that greater permit certainty for shellfish growers under the Initiatives will allow us to flourish and continue creating jobs and helping restore the health of the state’s coastal waters and Puget Sound.”

Dennis McLerran, Regional Administrator for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in Seattle said: “Clean water is the key to protecting Washington's shellfish. EPA is fully committed to supporting the state and tribes by bringing our funds and our authorities to bear to clean up pollution and keep shellfish abundant and safe to harvest in Washington.”

Betsy Peabody, Executive Director for the Puget Sound Restoration Fund said: “Puget Sound Restoration Fund is enormously pleased to be working with NOAA, the treaty tribes and Washington state to restore Olympia oysters, pinto abalone and clean shellfish harvesting areas. Shellfish are important players in maintaining a healthy ecosystem and the State and National Shellfish Initiatives provide great traction to ongoing shellfish restoration efforts.”

Karen Anderson, Washington Director for the Nature Conservancy said: “The shellfish initiative is good news for Puget Sound and for shellfish growers who provide us with healthy and delicious local seafood. It’s a big step toward improving water quality for both people and nature.”

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Media Contacts:

Governor’s Communications Office, 360-902-4136

NOAA media relations: Brian Gorman, 206-526-6613 (brian.gorman@noaa.gov)

Washington shellfish industry media relations: Bill Dewey, 360 432-3334; cell, 360-790-2330 (billd@taylorshellfish.com)

Washington Shellfish Initiative: www.psp.wa.gov/shellfish.php

National Shellfish Initiative: http://aquaculture.noaa.gov/us/shellfish_initiative.html