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Early results in for Oakland Bay, Shelton Harbor sediment study

OLYMPIA – The Washington Departments of Ecology (Ecology) and Health (Health) are evaluating the preliminary results from a sediment study conducted last fall in Oakland Bay and Shelton Harbor.

The preliminary data indicate the presence of dioxins in the surface samples. Experts with Health believe that people can continue to eat shellfish harvested in Oakland Bay. Shellfish don't accumulate dioxins well because of their low fat content.

"Based on what we've seen so far, there's no need for people to stop harvesting and eating shellfish from Oakland Bay," said Gregg Grunenfelder, Health's assistant secretary.

"What we know about other areas of Puget Sound tells us it's unlikely that eating shellfish from Oakland Bay or having contact with sediments from Oakland Bay or Shelton Harbor would harm people's health. It's also important to take a closer look, so we're going to do a sediment health consultation, and we recommend shellfish tissue sampling."

People are primarily exposed to low levels of dioxin through the food they eat, specifically from fatty animal tissue. Shellfish are low in fat and don't store dioxins the same way as in meat, dairy products and fish.

Dioxins have been linked to various health impacts. However, dioxin levels in sediments in Oakland Bay and Shelton Harbor are not expected to significantly increase everyday exposure to dioxin. Ecology and Health plan to carefully consider the need for cleanup actions to prevent unnecessary exposure to dioxin.

Sediment Study

Last September, Ecology began collecting samples of sediment and underwater accumulations of wood waste in Oakland Bay and Shelton Harbor. The intent was to assess the sediments for chemical contamination consistent with the types of historical industrial activities in the area and determine the extent of wood waste that could be deposited underwater.

Ecology agreed to share the raw data from the sediment and wood waste samples with stakeholders once received. Ecology expects to have the analysis of these data completed by early summer and will release a report at that time.

The Sampling and Analysis Plan explains the study, which includes a look at more than dioxins. The study also sampled for wood waste accumulations and detection of other chemicals. Visit:
www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/tcp/sites/oaklandBay/finalSAP/Final%20SAP.pdf.

"We committed to share the initial results with our stakeholders even though we don't have the full analysis in hand, which is why we are announcing this information so early in the process," said Ecology's regional manager for the Toxics Cleanup Program, Rebecca Lawson.

“We’ll have to wait a few more months to have a full characterization of the sediments as we set out to study last year.”

Ecology and Health have been working with the Squaxin Island Tribe to determine next steps in the process. They’ve shared the preliminary results with the Oakland Bay Clean Water District, local and state agencies and the shellfish and timber industries.

The preliminary results indicate:

- Dioxins were detected in Oakland Bay and Shelton Harbor surface sediments. The levels ranged from 4.4 parts per trillion to 54 parts per trillion in Oakland Bay and 1 parts per trillion to 175 parts per trillion in Shelton Harbor. Similar surface sample results from other urban Puget Sound areas ranged from less than 1 part per trillion to more than 200 parts per trillion.
- Chemicals listed in the state’s sediment management standards tested lower than the state’s threshold for cleanup. This includes heavy metals, semivolatile organic chemicals and PCBs. Dioxins aren’t part of the sediment management standards.
- Wood waste is located in various areas throughout the harbor and bay.

Additional actions in the next few months:

- Health will use the preliminary data to conduct a health consultation. This may be ready by the time Ecology’s complete sediment study is released.
- Develop a shellfish tissue sampling plan. This will allow Health to do a site-specific analysis of dioxins in shellfish harvested in Oakland Bay.
- Complete more analysis of sediment samples taken last fall to determine potential source(s) of dioxins. This involves looking at samples taken below surface sediments to see if dioxins can be detected at deeper levels and in what amount.
- Using current scientific technology, attempt to determine who may be responsible for the dioxins.
- Ecology will issue a final sediment and wood waste report.

The study of sediment is part of Gov. Gregoire’s initiative to protect and restore the health of Puget Sound. Ecology designated Oakland Bay as one of seven high-priority, early-action areas under the Puget Sound Initiative. Ecology is taking action in these areas to determine toxic cleanup needs.

Similar bay-wide sediment investigations are in various stages in other priority areas including Port Gardner at Everett, Fidalgo and Padilla bays at Anacortes, the Port Angeles Harbor and Olympia’s Budd Inlet.

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Media Contacts:
Kim Schmanke, Ecology media relations, 360-407-6239
Donn Moyer, Health media relations, 360-236-4076

For more information: Oakland Bay:
www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/tcp/sites/psi/oaklandBay/psi_oaklandBay.html

Frequently Asked Questions about dioxins (ATSDR):
http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/cabs/dioxins/

Puget Sound Initiative: www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/tcp/sites/psi/overview/psi_baywide.html