



A Deeper Dive into Issues Addressed by the Coastal Marine Strategy Shellfish Bed Closures

What's the issue?

Hundreds of kilometres of coastline in British Columbia have been closed long-term to shellfish harvesting for sanitary reasons. In Coles Bay, on the Saanich Peninsula on Vancouver Island, within the territory of the Pauquachin First Nation, shellfish harvesting has been closed since 1997. This is due to poor water quality: primarily from pollution from septic systems, agricultural runoff, municipal stormwater systems, recreational and commercial boats, sewage, and livestock. The closure of shellfish beds not only prevents First Nations like Pauquachin from exercising their Treaty and Aboriginal rights, but it also impacts the culture, health, food security, and economies of communities throughout coastal British Columbia.

Why has it been hard to fix?

Pauquachin has pointed out that in Washington State, the law requires that within 180 days of shellfish beds being closed, the government must implement a program to address the pollution.¹ No equivalent requirement exists in policy or law in British Columbia. Without such a requirement, federal, provincial and local governments have tended to ignore shellfish bed contamination and closures have remained in place for decades.

How can the Coastal Marine Strategy help solve it?

In the B.C. Coastal Marine Strategy, the provincial government has committed to:

- Co-create a “Healthy Shellfish Initiative” with First Nations partners, modelled off successful programs and pollution correction legislation in Washington State. Set specific goals for remediation, in partnership with others. Identify pilot projects that can inform a coast-wide program flexible enough to meet distinct needs.
- Take steps to reduce marine-based sources of pollution that directly impact the safety of traditional shellfish harvesting areas and marine terrestrial foods.

Advocate for changes to the federal Canadian Shellfish Sanitation Program, including more funding to support increased water quality testing and pollution remediation.

1. University of Victoria Environmental Law Centre, “Cleaning up Coles Bay: The Urgent Need to Restore Traditional Shellfish Harvesting Sites of the Pauquachin First Nation” (June 2023), online: <<https://elc.uvic.ca/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/2021-02-02-Cleaning-Up-Coles-Bay-Provincial-Submission-2023Jun21.pdf>>.

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