

October 28, 2020



Public Notices of pending shellfish farm permits

Coastal residents in Washington State (WA) who live near shellfish farms as well as organizations who track activities which occur along the shoreline may see an influx of public notices regarding shellfish farms. Federal permitting for shellfish farms in Washington has changed recently, requiring most shellfish farms in the State to complete another permitting process, even those farms that were recently approved to operate.

Since 2017, the US Army Corps of Engineers (Army Corps) has authorized numerous farms in WA under a general permit. These farms range in size from small (e.g., a quarter of an acre) to large. Most of these farms have been in operation for decades and in some cases over a century. Because the general permit under which these farms have been operating will soon be unavailable, farmers in WA are pursuing individual permits from the Army Corps. These permits also require review by the WA Department of Ecology for consistency with the Coastal Zone Management Act and in some cases the Clean Water Act Section 401 Certification.

The individual permit process is different from the previous general permit process in that public notice is provided for some of the farms; whereas individual public notices were not required under the general permit. This difference is neither a result of a change in farm practice nor a change in individual permit regulations. It also does not reflect expansion of commercial shellfish farming in the State. In fact, the total footprint of commercial shellfish farming in WA has slightly decreased over the last decade. With a few limited exceptions, these public notices are simply for the reauthorization of existing farms. A significant number of applications are pending before the Army Corps and State, with more to come in the weeks ahead, resulting in what will be numerous public notices.

Members of the Pacific Coast Shellfish Growers Association (PCSGA) farm a wide variety of healthy, sustainable shellfish in communities where you live. Farming shellfish in WA has occurred since the late 1800's with careful attention to environmental protection, shellfish health safety, and meeting rigorous regulatory requirements. Shellfish farmers are not only stewards of the area where they farm, they are also champions of protecting the marine environment. Without clean, healthy waters in which to grow shellfish, they cannot continue to grow and sell healthy, nutritious oysters, clams, mussels and geoduck for human consumption.

Our members take seriously their stewardship responsibilities. Beyond their personal commitment, their local and federal farm permits have conditions that address a broad range of environmental concerns, including eelgrass, forage fish, use of plastics and more. Shellfish reared on the farms provide valuable ecosystem services and the businesses are very important to Washington State's economy providing critical employment in many rural coastal communities.

As producers of food, PCSGA encourages others to take time to learn about how their food, including shellfish, is produced. There are several organizations which are engaging in sustainable fish production including WA Sea Grant, NOAA, The Nature Conservancy, and the Aquarium of the Pacific. If you'd like to speak directly to a farmer about their commitment to marine resources and how they farm, or if you have other questions about shellfish culture in WA, please do not hesitate to contact me.

For more information, contact:
Margaret Pilaro, Executive Director
margaretpilaro@pcsga.org
(360) 754-2744