

A DETERMINED COMMUNITY RECOVERING SHELLFISH BEDS

DRAYTON HARBOR

A seed of hope, a bed of oysters, and an ocean of determination inspire a community to clean up a long-polluted harbor

Washington state is the nation’s largest commercial producer of oysters, clams, and mussels, and Puget Sound is prime shellfish territory. But in Drayton Harbor, near the city of Blaine, shellfish harvest was not an option—and it wasn’t for lack of shellfish. It was because the harbor lacked just one key ingredient: clean water.

Shellfish growers estimated that a clean Drayton Harbor could produce \$2 million in oysters each year on just 100 acres, but beginning in 1988 water pollution caused by human and animal waste had so polluted the area that the Washington State Department of Health began to close shellfish beds to harvest. By 1995, conditions had worsened to the point most of the harbor was

declared off limits to shellfish harvesting. In an area already experiencing a depressed economy, this was discouraging news indeed. Community leaders wanted to know why the pollution was happening and what they could do about it.

In 1998, 21-percent of septic systems were failing along the Drayton Harbor shoreline. Breaks in aging sewer lines also were a problem, as was the nearby marina where some boaters were dumping human waste. Pollution from Dakota and California creeks was caused by failing septic systems and poor livestock practices. As more and more sources of pollution were identified, a solution seemed almost out of reach. The entire harbor was shut down to shellfish harvest in 1999.



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But in 2001, officials at Trillium Corporation, owners of the 200-room Semiahmoo Resort, which overlooks Drayton Harbor, organized a community meeting to ask one question: Could locals work together to clean up the harbor’s water with the goal of serving locally grown oysters in the resort’s restaurant? It took a big stretch of imagination to even ask the question. But with that meeting, the seed of hope took root. Further support came from Puget Sound Recovery Fund (PSRF) when they said yes to supporting the effort.

A nonprofit group formed, and with special permission from the state, volunteers planted baby oysters in an area where harvesting was prohibited. It takes oysters three years to grow big enough to harvest—that’s all the time the community had to clean up Drayton Harbor.

People quickly came together to figure out which actions would reduce the human waste getting into the Harbor. Septic systems were inspected and repaired. Broken sewer pipes were located and repaired. Boat pump-out facilities were moved to reduce accidental spills of human waste into the Harbor, and pet-waste stations were installed in parks and along public trails. Eventually, a new sewage-treatment plant was built to treat wastewater before it went into Drayton Harbor.

With seven dairies and dozens of farms upstream of the harbor, agricultural waste needed to be addressed too. The Whatcom Conservation District helped farmers voluntarily improve their manure-handling practices. The county outlawed the application of liquid manure on bare ground from September to March; the

Drayton Harbor, photo credit: Jon Bridgman

