



# Wellfleet Shellfish Department



300 Main Street, Wellfleet, Massachusetts 02667

TO: Shellfish Advisory Board Members: Rebecca Taylor, John Duane,  
Nick Sirucek, Ethan Estey, Stephen Pickard, Adrien Kmiec, Brad Morse, Chris Merl

DATE: April 10, 2024

RE: Contaminated Quahog Relay

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Dear SAB members:

I have spoken with my colleagues Johnny and Chris, as well as with Mass. Division of Marine Fisheries (DMF) staff about the concerns expressed by the Shellfish Advisory Board concerning the contaminated quahog relay. We at the Shellfish Department believe the quahog relay is a way for us to supply harvestable clams to commercial and recreational shellfishermen each year, as well as provide spawning stock to create new quahog beds. We have received much positive feedback from commercial shellfishermen about seed clams populating Chipman's Cove that directly attribute to our participation in this relay. In addition, the clams at Chipman's Cove are a staple and provide joy for recreational shellfishermen each winter.

With input from DMF, we have put together some updated details about the program for you to review and consider.

- The quahogs are not contaminated per se but come from areas where the water is contaminated with fecal coliform levels that exceed the threshold to allow them to be put in the conditional classification. They come from areas in the Taunton River that are classified as restricted, not prohibited.
- Areas in Wellfleet with a conditional classification are the Herring River and Duck Creek, and MADMF monitors fecal coliform counts to open and close these each year. A relay from the Taunton River is the same as moving shellfish from Duck Creek or Herring River when they are in the closed status.
- MADMF allows municipalities to move contaminated shellfish (from restricted or conditionally restricted areas) to clean waters (approved and conditionally approved areas) for natural depuration and propagation.
- Relays are conducted under stringent NSSP guidelines and are heavily supervised by state and local enforcement authorities.
- Contaminated shellfish must remain at the relay site for a minimum of 60 days and recommended for the duration of one spawning season. If we plant them here by June 15, we can open to harvest in the late summer/early fall.

[wellfleet-ma.gov/shellfish-department](http://wellfleet-ma.gov/shellfish-department)

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- The Taunton River quahogs are disease tested January to March prior to relaying and tested again for fecal coliform levels before they are allowed to be harvested for eating. This is to make sure that they meet NSSP requirements for safety. (See attached testing results from 2024.)
- The test sample size is 60 animals from sites in the Taunton River for disease testing and 20-30 animals and overlying water samples for fecal coliform testing prior to opening for direct harvest.
- Shellfish are analyzed for dermo, QPX and neoplasia. The shellfish also undergo condition indexing where they are opened to look for any abnormalities and make sure they are healthy.
- Several years ago, the shellfish were also tested for PCBs and mercury, two substances in the NSSP model ordinance which have standards; other substances have action levels. For decades, all results have been below the action levels, and there has been no new industry active along the Taunton River.
- The [Town of Westport](#) has five aquaculture grants and purchases 5,000 bushels of relay quahogs a year. Other towns that have aquaculture and conduct relays include Provincetown, Truro, Yarmouth, Barnstable, Bourne, Wareham, Marion, Mattapoisett, and Fairhaven.
- In 2023, 11 towns participated in relays from the Taunton River totaling 9,578.5 bushels.
- There has never been an issue with this program, which has been going on for 100 years. No association of die offs of natural stock or relayed stock has ever been identified.
- Wellfleet participated in the quahog relay in the 1950s, and in the 1980s conducted contaminated oyster relays where the oysters came from contaminated areas within Wellfleet. We have been participating in this program since 2018.
- There is no record of red tide in the Taunton River.
- Rhode Island and Massachusetts monitor for harmful algal species in Mount Hope Bay; when an action level is reached, all shellfish harvesting is prohibited, including relays.

We have created informative signage that we post each year alongside the contaminated closure signs to help educate people with positive information about the program and its safety – and the health and cleanliness of the quahogs once they have had ample time to purge (see attached).

Thank you,

Nancy, Johnny and Chris