

Bay Center, Washington

People and Place

Location

Bay Center is located in Southwestern Washington at 46°37'54"N and 123°57'13"W. The community is situated on Goose Point Peninsula near the center of the eastern edge of Willapa Bay at the mouth of the Palix River. In recent geologic history, the Columbia River also had its mouth in Willapa Bay, but the river has since migrated southward. Sandy sediments deposited by the Columbia along its former course formed Long Beach Peninsula, the western border of the bay, and Goose Point Peninsula, on which Bay Center is located.¹ The community is almost equidistant from the major metropolitan areas of Portland, Oregon, which lies approximately 126 driving miles to the southeast, and Seattle, Washington, which lies 144 miles to the northeast. Bay Center occupies a land area of 0.39 square miles.²

Demographic Profile

According to the 2000 U.S. Census, Bay Center had a population of 174. The community displayed a relatively even gender balance, with 51.7% male and 48.3% female residents. The median age for both sexes in Bay Center was 30, more than 5 years younger than the national median age of 35.3. Bay Center's population in 2000 lived in 70 households, with 82.8% of residents living in family households.

The racial composition of Bay Center at the time of the 2000 U.S. Census was about 68.4% White, 14.4% American Indian and Alaska Native, and 0.6% Asian. Approximately 9.2% of residents chose the category "Some Other Race," and 7.5% classified themselves as having "Two or More Races." About 10.3% of the population identified as Hispanic or Latino. Only 1.7% of the population in 2000 was foreign-born, and all of these individuals reported Columbia as their place of birth. Because Bay Center was not recognized as a place during the 1990 U.S. Census, data indicating patterns of demographic evolution are not available for the community.

About 80% of Bay Center residents 18 and over had a high school diploma or equivalency or higher, 19.1% had obtained a bachelor's degree or higher, and 13% had completed a graduate or professional degree. The highest level of educational attainment for 37.4% of residents 18 and over was a high school degree. High school graduation rates for Bay Center were comparable to the national rate of 79.7% in 2000, but the rate of college graduation was less than the national rate of 22.3%. The proportion of the population with a graduate or professional degree in Bay Center was significantly larger than the national proportion of 7.8%.

History

North Pacific County has historically been home to native peoples from the Chehalis, Chinook, and Willapa language groups.³ Goose Point Peninsula was inhabited predominately by the Chinook, whose overall territory included the region bordering the Columbia River and the much of the area surrounding Willapa Bay.⁴ Chinook groups depended heavily on fishing and coastal resources and developed extensive trade networks within the region. They harvested native oyster species in Willapa Bay and fished for salmon and sturgeon in the Columbia and other area rivers. Starting in the 1850s, native populations throughout the region were devastated by introduced diseases and conflicts with Euro-American settlers. When native populations in other areas were decimated or removed to reservations, the Chinook community in Bay Center remained comparatively large.

In the summers of 1890 and 1891, anthropologist Franz Boas conducted linguistic research in Bay Center, reportedly the only location where he was able find elders with knowledge of the lower Chinook dialect.⁵ Today, native residents comprise a significant 14.4% of the Bay Center population, and the contemporary Chinook Nation, a tribal organization that represents individuals descended from several Chinook groups, holds a Summer Gathering in the town each year.⁶ Some members of the Shoalwater Bay Tribe, a federally recognized Chinookan Tribe with a reservation in nearby Tokeland (41 miles), also reside in Bay Center, where the Tribe operates a small oyster farm.⁷ Other native residents may have membership in the Quinault Indian Nation, which controls reservation land on the southwestern portion of the Olympic Peninsula.

At low tide, half of Willapa Bay becomes exposed, creating 40,000 intertidal acres that provide ideal habitat for native oysters (*Ostrea lurida*).⁸ In 1849, a schooner searching for oyster beds entered Willapa Bay and made contact with native residents who supplied oysters in exchange for trade goods. News of the abundant oyster beds and timber resources in the area soon spread, attracting the area's first White settlers. With the California Gold Rush in full swing, entrepreneurs streamed into the Bay and began harvesting oysters at a feverish pace for the lucrative California market. The first permanent White settler on Goose Point Peninsula established residence in 1853. Others soon followed and these settlers temporarily adopted the native name Palix, meaning "slough covered with trees" for the community. In 1875, following a community-wide contest to choose a new name for the town, Palix became Bay Center, a reference to the town's central position within Willapa Bay.⁹ By 1900, residents of many faiths had constructed so many churches that the town was locally known as New Jerusalem or Saints Rest.¹⁰

Bay Center continued to grow throughout the nineteenth century, and entrepreneurs established many successful oyster harvesting and processing companies. A short-lived salmon cannery operated from 1886-1889, employing a substantial number of Chinese laborers whose descendants have since left the area. Before the construction of roads connecting Goose Point Peninsula to other Bay communities, Bay Center residents traveled mainly by boat. As a result, the city's pier functioned as the community's "main street" and the center of social and commercial activity. When native oyster populations declined significantly in the late 1800s, Bay Center residents established oyster farms in an attempt to revive the industry. In 1891, the Washington State Legislature allowed oyster growers to purchase or lease areas of the bay that they had been farming, creating the system of private ownership that structures the Willapa Bay oyster industry today. Attempts to farm native oysters were not highly successful, but the industry was fully revitalized in the late 1920s when farmers began raising the Pacific oyster (*Crassostrea gigas*), a native of Japan.

Oyster farming remains a driving force behind the contemporary Willapa Bay economy, and Bay Center hosts a number of seafood farming operations and processors that produce oysters for the international market. At least one of these companies, Goose Point Oysters (Nisbet Oyster Company), operates a technologically advanced, highly automated processing facility in Bay Center with cold pasteurization equipment and a machine that pre-shucks oysters using intense, directed pressure. Oysters processed using this equipment maintain a shelf-life of up to 17 days and can be shipped on the half-shell to markets as far away as China.¹¹ Commercial fishing and processing of Dungeness crab, salmon, and Manila clams are also important activities in contemporary Bay Center.¹²

Infrastructure

Current Economy

Bay Center supports a number of aquaculture and seafood processing operations that employ local residents and form the foundation of the local economy. The majority of these operations specialize in harvesting and processing oysters. Employers in the seafood and fishing industry include Goose Point Oysters (Nisbet Oyster Company) and Bay Center Farms (Bay Center Mariculture). The Shoalwater Bay Oyster Company, which is owned by the Shoalwater Bay Tribe, employs eight tribal members.¹³ Some Bay Center residents may also commute to the many farms and processors located in neighboring communities. The Bay Center Marina and the Bay Center KOA, as well as a number of small bait shops, employ residents and provide services for fishermen and tourists. Weyerhaeuser and a number of other logging companies are also active in the Willapa Bay region and are a potential source of employment for Bay Center residents.

According to the 2000 U.S. Census, 42.6% of the Bay Center population 16 and older was employed and another 57.4% did not participate in the labor force (were not actively seeking work) in 2000. Bay Center therefore displayed a remarkable 0% unemployment rate (calculated by dividing the unemployed population by the labor force).

Approximately 6.1% of the employed civilian population 16 years and over worked for the state or federal government in 2000. About 10.2% indicated that they worked in agriculture, forestry, fishing, and hunting, but this percentage may be artificially low given that many fishermen and seafood farmers are self-employed and are not represented in these data. About 26.5% of residents were employed in retail trade, 24.5% in wholesale trade, 12.2% in manufacturing, 8.2% in education, health, and social services, 6.1% in public administration, and 4.1% in accommodation and food services. No Bay Center residents were in the military in 2000.

According to the U.S. Census, the per capita income in Bay Center was about \$19,325 in 1999, compared to a national per capita income of \$21,587. The median household income in Bay Center was about \$38,409 compared to a national median household income of \$41,994. Approximately 13.4% of residents were living below the poverty level in 1999, a value only slightly in excess of the national poverty level of about 12.4%.

There were 92 housing units in Bay Center in 2000. Approximately 23.9% of these units were vacant at the time of the census, but 68.1% of these vacant units were intended for seasonal, recreational, or occasional use. About 64.3% of occupied housing units in Bay Center were owner-occupied, compared to 66.2% ownership for occupied housing units in the U.S. overall.

Governance

Under Washington State law, an area cannot be incorporated as a city unless it houses a minimum of 1500 residents. Bay Center is therefore classified as an unincorporated area governed by Pacific County. Bay Center has neither a City Council nor its own separate municipal tax structure. Bay Center residents elect county officials, whose offices are located in the County Seat of South Bend, approximately 15 miles northeast along US-101. Pacific County, which was organized in 1851, has a 7.8% sales tax and a 9.8% hotel/lodging tax.^{14,15}

Several taxes directly impact commercial and recreational fishermen. Commercial fishermen operating in Washington waters are subject to the Business and Occupation (B&O) tax under the “extraction” classification (0.48%); those fishing outside of Washington waters but selling fish within Washington are subject to the tax under either the “wholesaling” or “retailing” classifications (0.48% and 0.47% respectively), unless the fish are sold in interstate or foreign

commerce.¹⁶ Those who both catch and sell fish in Washington are eligible for a Multiple Activities Tax Credit (MATC).¹⁷

Washington State levies a Food, Fish, and Shellfish Tax, paid by the first commercial processor of food fish or shellfish, including: Chinook, coho, and chum salmon or eggs (5.62%); sockeye and pink salmon or eggs (3.37%); oysters (0.09%); sea urchins/cucumbers (4.92%); and shellfish and other food fish or eggs (2.25%). Tuna, mackerel, and jackfish are exempt from this tax. Additionally, there is an Enhanced Food Fish Tax, which applies to the “first possession of enhanced food fish by an owner in Washington State” and is based on the “value of the enhanced food fish at the point of landing.”¹⁸ The rate of the tax depends upon the species of fish or shellfish.

Vessels used for commercial fishing purposes part-time are subject to an annual Washington State Watercraft Excise Tax levied at 0.5% of the fair market value of the boat. Vessels used for commercial fishing purposes full-time are subject to personal property taxes at the base rate levied by the state. Washington also levies a 10% excise tax on fishing equipment, a three percent tax on electric motors and sonar fish finders, and import duties on tackle and pleasure boats to fund sportfish restoration programs.¹⁹ Washington State levies a tax of \$0.28 per gallon on motor vehicle fuel. Since most of this tax is used to maintain terrestrial roadways, Washington boaters are entitled to a refund of about \$0.17 per gallon. The difference includes state sales tax and a penny per gallon contribution to a Coastal Protection Fund. Most diesel fuel sold at docks has already had this tax removed.²⁰

Bay Center lies within the jurisdiction of the Pacific Fisheries Management Council and is approximately 126 driving miles from Council meetings in Portland, 144 miles from Seattle, 760 miles from San Francisco, and 1210 miles from San Diego.²¹ The nearest U.S. Coast Guard Group and Air Station is located in Warrenton, Oregon (51 miles), and the Coast Guard operates the National Motor Lifeboat School (NMLB) in Ilwaco, Washington (32 miles).²² Bay Center is under the jurisdiction of the NMFS Northwest Regional Office located in Seattle and the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) Southwest Regional Office in Vancouver, Washington (117 miles).

Facilities

Bay Center lies along U.S. Highway 101, which runs the length of the Pacific Coast from Seattle, Washington, to Los Angeles, California. Because Bay Center is a relatively small community, residents must travel to nearby South Bend (15 miles) or Raymond (19 miles) to access major retail stores and other amenities. The nearest major international airport is located in Portland, Oregon (126 miles), and the Willapa Harbor Airport in Raymond provides an unattended paved runway that is open to the public.²³ A KOA campground is located just outside of Bay Center, but the nearest hotels and motels are located in South Bend and Raymond.

Bay Center lies within the South Bend School District, but there are no public schools located in the community itself.²⁴ Students travel by bus to schools in South Bend. The District offers an elementary school, a middle school, and a high school. Because Bay Center is not served by a sewer district and has no municipal water system, residents rely on private septic systems, private wells, or services provided by private companies. Electricity is supplied by Public Utility District No. 2 of Pacific County, Washington. Law enforcement services are administered by the Pacific County Sheriff's Office, and fire safety services are provided by Pacific County Fire District #6 (located in Bay Center). The closest major health care facilities

are Willapa Harbor Hospital in South Bend (15 miles) and Ocean Beach Hospital in Ilwaco (32 miles).

The Bay Center Marina, which is considered part of the larger Port of Willapa complex, provides mooring space for 20 vessels. The marina hosts only commercial vessels at a rate of \$20 per month and space is granted on a first-come-first-serve basis (no reservations available). The facility is regularly dredged to a depth of 10 feet below mean low tide, and construction on new steel pilings, aluminum gangways, and six-foot wood-planked mooring floats was completed in the fall of 2002.²⁵

Involvement in West Coast Fisheries

Commercial Fishing

In available records, vessel types and landings data for the Bay Center Marina are aggregated with data for the larger Port of Willapa Bay. In 2000 Willapa Bay supported a total of 276 vessels, including 209 commercial, 18 tribal commercial, 6 aquaculture, and 43 personal vessels. Landings recorded for Willapa Bay in 2000 were in the following West Coast fisheries (data shown represents landings in metric tons/value of said landings/number of vessels landing): coastal pelagic (confidential/confidential/1), crab (444.9 t/\$1,941,008/44), groundfish (4.6 t/\$3889/6), salmon (122.5 t/\$178,084/71), shellfish (26.8 t/\$73534/63), shrimp (399.9 t/\$397143/8), and other species (13.1 t/\$31,242/51).

Bay Center residents owned 19 vessels in 2000 that participated in West Coast fisheries, including six that participated in the Federally Managed Groundfish fishery. According to recorded data the number of vessels owned by Bay Center residents that participated in each said fishery by state (WA/OR/CA) was: coastal pelagic (3/0/0), groundfish (0/0/NA), highly migratory species (NA/0/NA), salmon (4/1/0), shellfish (NA/0/NA), shrimp (NA/0/0), and other species (1/0/0).²⁶

No individuals living in Bay Center in 2000 held federal groundfish fishery permits. In 2000, recorded data indicates that the number of Bay Center residents holding permits in each said fishery by state (WA/OR/CA) was: crab (6/0/0), highly migratory species (NA/0/0), salmon (4/1/0), shellfish (6/0/NA), shrimp (2/0/0), and other (1/0/0).²⁷

According to available data, 21 state permits were registered to Bay Center residents in 2000. Recorded data indicates that the number of permits held by these community members in each said fishery by state (WA/OR/CA) was: crab (8/0/0), highly migratory species (NA/0/0), salmon (4/0/0), shellfish (6/0/NA), shrimp (2/0/0), and other species (1/0/0).²⁸

There were at least two oyster processors operating in Bay Center in 2000, the Nisbet Oyster Company Inc. and the Ekone Oyster Company. The number of people employed by these companies in the same year is not available. The estimated total weight and value of their processed products in 2000 is confidential.

The Nisbet Oyster Company was founded in 1975 by David Nisbet. Today, Goose Point Oysters is the registered trademark owned by Nisbet Oyster Company. The company has grown from its original 10 acres to over 500 acres of tideland on Willapa Bay and a new 15,000 sq ft oyster processing plant. The Company is able to shuck about 80,000 gallons of Pacific oysters and ship approximately 1.2 million lbs of in-shell product annually. Internet resources indicate that the company employs 45 full-time men and women.²⁹

The Ekone Oyster Company was founded in 1982 as a small smokehouse and has grown to employ close to 50 people. Ekone is still known for its smoked oysters and farms on over 350 acres of Willapa Bay tideland.

Sportfishing

Because the Bay Center Marina provides moorage space only for commercial vessels, tourists and nonlocal sport fishermen may choose larger nearby marinas and ports on Willapa Bay. Many visitors choose Bay Center, however, as a place to recreationally harvest oysters and clams. Rhodesia Beach, just outside of Bay Center, is a popular site for sport fishermen interested in digging Pacific oysters and Eastern softshell and Manila clams. In addition, many local Bay Center residents engage in sportfishing within the Willapa Bay area and along the Pacific Coast. According to the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, there are no sportfish license vendors operating in Bay Center. In 2003 and 2004, no Bay Center residents owned or operated charter boats in Washington State.

In Catch Record Card Area 2-1 (Willapa Bay) the 2000-2001 sport salmon catch was 870, including 468 Chinook, 354 coho, and 48 jacks. Data for Area 2-1 is based on catch record cards. The total catch is down from 2137 salmon recorded in the 1999-2000 season. In 2000 the number of marine angler trips in the sport salmon fishery is not available. The 2000-2001 sport sturgeon catch was recorded at 96 fish.

Subsistence Fishing

Members of the Chinook Nation remain heavily involved in subsistence fishing in the area, but, because the tribe does not have federal recognition, members have no formal fishing rights within the region. In the past, military intervention has been used to stop native fishermen from using traditional fishing grounds without permits. No specific data on native subsistence fishing is available because of its controversial nature, but tribal members maintain that fishing remains central to Chinook identities and livelihoods. The restoration of traditional fishing rights is one of the driving forces behind continuing efforts to establish federal recognition for the tribe.³⁰

Although the Chinook Nation is the prominent tribe on the Lower Columbia and Willapa Bay, the Shoalwater Bay Tribe traditionally extracted fish and shellfish resources from Willapa Bay. The Shoalwater Bay Tribe, located in Tokeland, reside on the north end of Willapa Bay in Pacific County. The Tribe has 237 enrolled members and a resident service population of 1148.³¹ Subsistence fishing and shellfish harvesting by the Shoalwater Bay Tribe is not discussed in great detail in this Community Profile due to the lack of available data. Many Shoalwater Tribal members, by accepting 80-acre allotments on the larger Quinault reservation have attained the privilege of Quinault treaty rights,³² however specific data Quinault participation in resource harvesting in Willapa Bay is not available.

Involvement in North Pacific Fisheries

Commercial Fishing

No vessels based in Bay Center participated in North Pacific Fisheries in 2000. A total of five Bay Center residents worked as crewmembers aboard vessels involved in North Pacific fisheries.

Sportfishing

According to state records, Bay Center residents purchased a total of three sportfishing licenses for North Pacific fisheries in 2000.

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