

Sea squirts invade waters off Edmonds

The slimy creatures threaten shellfish

By Bill Sheets
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EDMONDS -- It's like something out of a James Bond movie: deep sea divers doing battle against an invading foreign agent.

In this case, though, the foreign threat is a slimy, spongy underwater creature known as a sea squirt.

Diligent divers have been working to clear out *Didemnum tunicate* found a few years ago in Edmonds' Underwater Dive Park, diver Bruce Higgins said. The invasive sea life recently was in the news after being found in abundance on Maury Island in south Puget Sound.

"My choice of words would be that we are in remission for now," Higgins said of Edmonds.

In 2004, two patches of sea squirt were found in the Edmonds dive park -- one about 30 square feet and the other much smaller. Divers covered the critters with plastic, which kept them from spreading and hastened their deaths.

"We are still monitoring for them quarterly at the Underwater Park and during the fall of 2007 a few patches smaller than the size of your hand were found and dealt with," Higgins wrote. "Our current process is that since the *Didemnum* are so near the sediment we just bury them with sand, which kills them."

The sea squirt crowds out other organisms and is considered a threat to native shellfish. They might have come to the Sound in the ballast of ships or through the long-abandoned practice of importing shellfish seed.

Beginning in February 2006, state officials targeted the tunicates as an enemy of the Sound. They allocated \$750,000 to stop their spread.

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