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RED TIDE TRIGGERS MAINE SHELLFISH FISHERY FAILURE DETERMINATION

NOAA Fisheries Service has announced a formal determination that the Maine shellfish fishery is in a commercial failure triggered by a massive red tide bloom.

The determination came in response to a letter from Maine Governor John E. Baldacci requesting assistance for the hard-hit state shellfish industry. The action was made through a provision of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act and covers the state's molluscan shellfish fishery.

"NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service will continue to coordinate with the State of Maine as developments occur," said Dr. William T. Hogarth, NOAA assistant administrator and Fisheries Service director. Hogarth signed the letter on the Maine commercial fishery failure determination. In it, he stated that it was recognized that effects of the fishery resource disaster have already begun and will increase with the red tide's duration.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries) last week closed a portion of federal waters off the New England coast to the harvest of all species of shellfish, with the exception of scallop meats, due to the spread of toxic algal blooms, commonly known as red tide.

The Food and Drug Administration had requested NOAA Fisheries Service take the immediate action because the severity of the illness associated with Paralytic Shellfish Poisoning (PSP) that can result from eating contaminated shellfish. PSP is considered to be a serious health threat. Red tide algae blooms produce marine biotoxins that cause PSP. The algae blooms create a neurotoxin that accumulates in filter-feeding shellfish and other parts of the marine food web.

The Maine Department of Marine Resources had halted the harvesting of all shellfish within state waters along the Maine coast from Canada south to the New Hampshire border.

NOAA has been working with the New England states to monitor the harmful algal blooms and has awarded grants to Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution to support emergency response efforts to the largest red tide in New England since 1972. In the past decade, NOAA Ocean Service has contributed $11 million in funding to support research in New England to foster several significant advances in monitoring harmful algal blooms.

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“Harmful algal blooms are a serious human health threat and are economically damaging to communities,” said retired Navy Vice Admiral Conrad C. Lautenbacher, Jr., Ph.D., under secretary of commerce for oceans and atmosphere and NOAA administrator. “Monitoring efforts assist states in maintaining a safe and plentiful seafood supply by allowing targeted closures.”

NOAA officials emphasize that commercially available seafood is safe to eat, and that residents and visitors to the region should follow the guidelines offered by local officials.

NOAA’s Ecology and Oceanography of Harmful Algal Blooms and Monitoring and Event Response to Harmful Algal Blooms have been supporting a research effort in each region as causes of the blooms vary by ecological conditions and algal species.

NOAA, an agency of the U.S. Department of Commerce, is dedicated to enhancing economic security and national safety through research to better understand weather and climate-related events and to manage wisely the nation's coastal and marine resources.

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