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NOAA Fisheries Service Takes Emergency Action to Address Red Tide

Gloucester, MA – NOAA Fisheries Service is taking emergency action today to close a portion of Federal waters off the coasts of New Hampshire and Massachusetts to the harvest of all species of shellfish (bivalves), with the exception of scallop meats, due to the spread of toxic algal blooms (red tide). This is the largest bloom on record in New England history warranting a public health emergency.

Red tide is responsible for the production of marine biotoxins that cause Paralytic Shellfish Poisoning (PSP) in persons consuming affected shellfish. The algae blooms create a neurotoxin that accumulates in filter-feeding shellfish and other parts of the marine food web. The consumption of affected shellfish poses a serious threat to public health.

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA), on behalf of the Secretary of Health and Human Services (HHS), requested NOAA Fisheries Service take immediate action to close this area given the severity of the illness associated with PSP.

“The protection of public safety is paramount,” said Dr. Bill Hogarth, NOAA Fisheries Service Director.

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts and Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution are working closely with the FDA and NOAA Fisheries Service to monitor the situation. Shellfish testing in these waters indicates the organisms that are capable of producing the toxin are increasing and the bloom is moving in an easterly direction toward Georges Bank.

The area of Nantucket Lightship has active shellfish beds for both surfclams and ocean quahogs and are in the affected area bound by the following coordinates: (1) 43°00 N. lat., 71°00 W. long.; (2) 43° 00 N. lat., 69°00 W. long.; (3) 40° 00 N. lat., 69°00 W. long.; (4) 40° 00 N. lat., 71° 00 W. long., and then ending at the first point (see attached map).

However, the majority of surfclams and ocean quahogs are harvested much further to the south and are in an unaffected area. Sea scallop adductor muscles harvested and shucked at sea as well as the artisanal Maine quahog fishery are unaffected by the toxin and are considered safe for public consumption.

The closure will remain in effect until September 30, 2005, with the possibility of a reduction or an extension of the closure based upon FDA's determination that the concentration of the toxin in shellfish is at a level considered safe for human consumption.

NOAA Fisheries Service is dedicated to protecting and preserving our nation's living marine resources and their habitat through scientific research, management and enforcement. NOAA Fisheries Service provides effective stewardship of these resources for the benefit of the nation, supporting coastal communities that depend upon them, and helping to provide safe and healthy seafood to consumers and recreational opportunities for the American public.

NOAA, an agency of the U.S. Department of Commerce, is dedicated to enhancing economic security and national safety through the prediction and research of weather and climate-related events and providing environmental stewardship of our nation's coastal and marine resources.

On the Web:

NOAA: <http://www.noaa.gov>

NOAA Fisheries: <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov>