Minus Tides May Tempt Clammers - But Just Say No

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{audio}/images/stories/mp3/120702.psp_danger.mp3{/audio}

Jay Barrett/KMXT

There will be some significant low tides around Kodiak Island for the next week or so, and that includes the ever-popular Independence Day when beach picnics are sure to be all the rage. A minus 2.5-foot tide, while not extremely low by Cook Inlet or Bristol Bay standards, is reasonably rare on the east side of the island. The extra-low lows will make for excellent tide-pool exploring, however health officials are cautioning Kodiak residents not to gather local shellfish because of high endemic levels of paralytic shellfish poisoning, or PSP.

Hear the whole conversation with Brian Himelbloom here:

{audio}/images/stories/mp3/120629.brian_himmelbloom_psp_2way.mp3{/audio}

Brian Himelbloom is associate professor of seafood microbiology at the Kodiak Seafood and Marine Science Center. That's the former Fish Tech Center on Near Island.

-- (PSP 1 24 sec "The shellfish - we're talking clams and ... paralytic shellfish poisoning.")

Kodiak Island waters have an unusually large amount of the algae that produce the neurotoxins naturally, though nobody is quite sure why. At least two deaths on the island have been attributed to PSP over the years.

In some parts of the country, PSP is called "Red Tide," because the algae bloom can be colorful, but Himelbloom says that is not the case in Alaska:

-- (PSP 2 16 sec "The dinoflagellate or microscopic algae, ... microorganism or algae.")

And unlike some food toxins, there is no way to make a PSP-infested shellfish safe to eat. Himelbloom calls the saxitoxins that produce PSP "scary:"

-- (PSP 3 14 sec "Unfortunately the chemistry of ... they're very stable compounds.")

In addition to being hardy, they are very poisonous. Himelbloom says it takes ingestion of very, very little to be fatal:

-- (PSP 4 31 sec "Zero point zero zero zero zero 35 ounce ... that person dies.")

Symptoms of PSP usually start with tingling lips and then fingers and toes in as little as 10 minutes after ingestion. Death can come within just a few hours.

So remember that when you're out enjoying the 4th of July, because PSP does not take a holiday.

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