

Mark Prado, *Marin Independent Journal*

The Marin County Public Health Department has issued a warning to people harvesting mussels, clams and oysters in Marin because of potentially deadly levels of a naturally occurring toxin, paralytic shellfish poison.

On Tuesday, the California Department of Public Health notified Public Health Officer Dr. Matthew Willis and other public health staff in Marin about a recent mussel sample from the Chimney Rock sentinel station, within Point Reyes National Seashore. That sample contained levels of paralytic shellfish poison at 37 times the “alert” level. That is the highest level detected in Marin in 20 years.

“Some PSP is detected regularly in the bay and the ocean, but the latest samples are showing record levels near Chimney Rock and points north of Stinson Beach,” Willis said, noting people up and down the California coastline are at risk. “Because these are potentially lethal levels, we want to make sure no one is out there collecting shellfish until it’s safe again. Please warn anybody who is out with boots and shovels looking for shellfish at low tide.”

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Paralytic shellfish poison is a marine toxin that causes illness through the consumption of contaminated shellfish. Changes in water conditions, including temperature, flow and salt content, can lead to surges in the poison. Cooking the shellfish does not alleviate the toxicity, county officials said.

The state warning does not apply to commercially sold clams, mussels, scallops or oysters from approved sources. State law permits only state-certified commercial shellfish harvesters or dealers to sell those products. Shellfish sold by certified harvesters and dealers are subject to frequent mandatory testing to monitor for toxins.

But individuals have been known to seek out bivalve shellfish for consumption; however, no illnesses have been reported recently in Marin.

“Like people who sport-fish, we get people out here who collect mussels and clams,” said John Dell’Osso, Point Reyes National Seashore spokesman, noting Drakes and Tomales bays are favored spots. “We have posted warnings at the trailheads to get word out to the public.”

The higher levels typically surface in the summer months, so the fact that they are occurring this early in the year is another sign of an increasingly unpredictable climate, county officials said.

Anyone who experiences tingling, numbness, headaches, dizziness, nausea, rapid pain or respiratory problems after ingesting any type of shellfish should seek medical attention immediately, Willis said.

There have been 542 reported illnesses and 39 deaths attributed to paralytic shellfish poison in California over the past 90 years, according to state statistics.