

Classification of shellfish harvest areas

Bivalve shellfish species (oysters, mussels and clams) feed by filtering large volumes of water. If the shellfish are living in water which contains microbiological or chemical contaminants, or natural toxins, they will concentrate this material in their gut. As people normally eat shellfish raw, and without removing the gut, they are likely to become ill if product is harvested from contaminated areas.

To protect the consumer, the NSW Food Authority limits when and where shellfish can be safely collected for commercial harvest. The legal requirements for commercial shellfish harvest—including the need to classify all shellfish harvest areas—are set out in Food Regulation 2010, which the Authority administers.

How areas are classified

Before shellfish can be commercially harvested, the Authority checks all the potential pollution sources near the harvest area. The Authority allocates a unique name to the harvest area and undertakes:

- a thorough assessment of all actual and potential pollution sources that could reach the harvest area from the land catchment, boating activity, marine wildlife and marine currents. Possible sources of contamination include wild and domestic animals and birds, sewage pumping stations and industrial waste.
- an examination of the environmental features that will affect pollution levels in the harvest area. For example, soil types, slope of the land in the catchment area, tidal conditions and weather patterns. The interaction between the pollution sources and the environment means each harvest area has a unique food safety risk profile that will determine the harvest areas classification and harvest area management plan.
- sampling of harvest area water and shellfish under a wide variety of environmental conditions to verify that during all tides, weather patterns and seasonal activities, the shellfish continue to meet strict food safety standards.
- an assessment of the natural phytoplankton and biotoxins active in the local marine waters to identify any human health risk.

All this information is analysed and put into a written report, the Sanitary Survey. This states whether or not the area is suitable for use as a commercial harvest area, and what classification to apply.

Two classification types

There are generally two major types of classification for shellfish harvest areas.

Conditionally Restricted harvest areas have some pollution, but at levels low enough to be removed from the shellfish. Shellfish harvested from these areas must be treated in a manner approved by the Authority to remove any food safety risks (eg depuration for 36 hours, or relaying to an Approved harvest area for 14 days).

Conditionally Approved harvest areas have little or no pollution, and the shellfish can be harvested and eaten raw without the need for any other food safety treatment.

However, under certain known and predictable environmental conditions, pollution levels increase and harvesting must stop. Examples of such environmental conditions include heavy rainfall, high river flows or reduced seawater salinity levels. Shellfish harvest areas have a specific harvest area management plan designed by the Authority which clearly identifies the conditions under which the harvest area must close, and the conditions under which it can reopen for harvest.

Steps following the classification process

Once a harvest area is classified for commercial harvesting, the Authority will work with the industry to develop:

- a harvest area management plan specific to the area. This will clearly document when and how to safely harvest. It is agreed to by all industry harvesters.
- a communication system which can quickly advise all stakeholders of the harvesting status of the area.
- a routine sampling plan to monitor microbiological and chemical pollution, and natural marine phytoplankton and biotoxin activity.

Classifications are reviewed

To maintain the classification status the area must be:

- operated in accordance with the local area harvest management plan, Food Regulation 2010 and the *NSW Shellfish Industry Manual*, and
- reviewed annually by the Authority to ensure that the sampling results and environmental conditions in the area have not significantly changed.

More information

Please contact the Authority if you have any queries about your licensing requirements.

- see the Authority's factsheets *Relay and translocation of shellfish* and *Depuration of shellfish*
- refer to the *NSW Shellfish Industry Manual* and accompanying guidelines
- visit the NSW Food Authority's website at www.foodauthority.nsw.gov.au
- phone the helpline on 1300 552 406

Note

This information is a general summary and cannot cover all situations. Food businesses are required to comply with all of the provisions of the Food Standards Code and the *Food Act 2003 (NSW)*.