

1st Geoduck Taskforce Meeting

January 9, 2024 12-3pm

AGENDA

- I. Introductions
- II. Purpose and goals of Task Force (see proviso language on next page)
- III. Overview of workplan and timeline
- IV. Review of the geoduck allocation and harvest process
- V. Initial identification of challenges to continued sustainable harvest
- VI. Enhancement strategy discussion
- VII. Working group discussion
- VIII. Action Items and close out

ATTENDEES

Abby Barnes (DNR), Alex Smith (DNR), Chris Eardley (WDFW), Mike McHugh (Tulalip), Vivianne Barry (Suquamish), Aaron Jones (Tulalip), Aaron Purser (Suquamish Seafoods), Tony Forsman (Suquamish), Blain Reeves (DNR), Chris Tom (Port Gamble S'Klallam), Cody Holden (Jamestown), Cathy Stanley (Tulalip), David Fyfe (NWIFC), Deanna Finley (Puyallup), David Winfrey (Puyallup), George Stearns (Puyallup), Josh Chapman (Jamestown S'Klallam), Josh Bagley (Suquamish), Julie Owens (Squaxin), Lauren Jenks (WDOH), Leslie Connelly (Ecology), Margaret Homerding (Nisqually), Matt Beirne (Lower Elwha), Max Showalter (DNR), Russ Hepfer (Lower Elwha), Sandy Zeiner (NWIFC), Tom Gorman (DNR), Vince McGowan (Ecology), Todd Hass (PSP), Blair Paul (Skokomish), Billy Plauche (Plauche & Carr), Amanda Carr (Plauche & Carr), Kelly McDonald (Confluence), Phil Bloch (Confluence), Alexis Hunyh (Confluence), Austin Paul (PNPTC), Alex Gouley (Skokomish), Rana Brown (Squaxin), Tyler Sullivan (PGST), Jeremy Wilbur (Swinomish), Paul Williams (Suquamish), P. Sean McDonald (UW), Eddie Kim (Squaxin), Franchesca Perez (Stillaguamish)

SUMMARY OF DISCUSSION

During this first meeting of the geoduck task force, the facilitation team summarized the goals of the group and heard feedback on priorities and interests from task force members. WDFW and DNR provided an overview of the process for establishing a harvestable geoduck biomass and determining harvest allocations. Based on individual interviews conducted prior to the meeting and discussion during the meeting, specific challenges to continued sustainable harvest were identified. These challenges, including water quality issues and harvest restrictions, plus the potential for geoduck population enhancement activities, were established as foundational topics for technical subgroups. Meeting attendees expressed interest in participating in these subgroups. The facilitation team will follow up with task force members and subgroup designees to establish subgroups and schedule meetings. The next task force meeting will be scheduled as soon as possible.

NOTES

II. Purposes and goals of the task force

- See proviso language at the end of this document
- Overview of the purposes and goals of the task force
- Welcome and charge from Washington DNR
- Summary of interviews with folks:
 - Sustainability of the fishery was important
 - Protection of human health was also on top of people's minds
 - Strategies do not include decreasing sustainability of the fishery or potentially affecting human health
- Comments:
 - Habitat concerns and changes for subtidal geoduck
 - Potentially other impacts that are reducing the amount of geoduck, changes in substrate and cover

IV. Review of the geoduck allocation and harvest process

- WDFW's perspective and role in setting harvest allocations
 - Geoduck fishery is co-managed
 - 7 geoduck regions
 - Annual management plans and regular stock assessments are developed to assess available harvest
 - Setting the sustainable harvest is dependent on a model – for a long time, 2.7% has been set as the sustainable harvest rate throughout the Puget Sound based on that model
 - Co-managers have done a lot of work in recent years to collect more survey information to inform an update to the fishery management tools
 - One of the issues is that management tool uses an average natural mortality rate without any variation across the 7 management regions
 - Based on observed tract recovery, the model has been off for some time – 39 years was the original estimate, now estimated to be 55 years but there is a lot of variation

- Fishery management assumes that tracts will recover to pre-harvest densities, but not all tracts are recovering as expected
- Switch to tract recovery-based strategy – requires much more survey work to understand the resource on a tract by tract basis and results in tract-based management
- Eric Sparkman (Squaxin) and Bob Conrad (NWIFC) – developed updated planning tool (Sparkman-Conrad Model)
- Certain regions have embraced the new planning tool, others using reduced harvest rate, others relying on the other model
- Questions and comments on WDFW presentation:
 - What model is the state using?
 - Different regions use different models and it depends on agreement between the co-managers within the regions. Some use the 2.7% overall harvest rate while others use the Sparkman-Conrad Model (e.g., South Puget Sound), and Hood Canal has a separate process for reduced harvest rate.
 - Model assumes 65% harvest of a tract before it is closed and allowed to recover
- DNR’s perspective and role in geoduck harvest and allocations
 - 65% is not a drop-dead number; there is other information that is used to determine if the tract has been fished down below the commercial biomass
 - DNR is designated by state law to manage and authorize harvest of geoduck
 - Management framework has been codified into a number of different documents (supplemental EIS, low-impact HCP, management plan)
 - Starting to get into other allocation strategies – likely require an update to the management plan
 - Geoduck fishery co-managers: DNR, WDFW, Washington treaty tribes
 - 4-7 public auctions conducted per year for access to the geoduck
 - SEPA process prior to every auction – notify public 4 weeks leading up to the auction (means there is some lead time necessary in understanding the biomass)
 - “Minimum” price per pound established prior to each auction – cost paid at auction is in addition to the per pound price
 - Certain circumstances result in relief from original bid (closures due to weather, unavailable compliance boat, etc.)
 - Diver typically removes 500 to 1000 pounds of geoduck per day
 - State targets removal of an average of 8-9k pounds of geoduck per day to achieve TAC (total allowable catch)
 - Limited by number of fishing days
 - DNR compliance monitoring – 13 commercial divers + 7 boats to do compliance
 - Involved in opening and closing tracts, conducting weigh-outs
 - DNR does compliance monitoring (consistency with state management plan and contract) while WDFW has the enforcement staff (broader range of enforcement and fisheries management responsibilities)
 - No Target TAC in North Sound – currently, east side of Whidbey has no resource available for commercial harvest
 - Two-year TAC in San Juans, consistently harvested in the second year

- Pounds harvested does not always track perfectly with the Target TAC
 - Also price fluctuations – depends on world market, etc.
- Revenue fluctuates wildly from year to year – expect about \$20 million revenue to State of Washington from commercial wildstock harvest this year
 - 50% in Aquatic Lands Enhancement Account and 50% in DNR RMCA – both funds allocated and appropriated by the legislature
 - DNR also provides funds to WDFW for the harvest allocation and surveys
- As the tracts have been fished down, the state is less able to have a large fleet on one tract – has led to needing to fish multiple tracts at once. Historically, Washington DNR was able to support larger fleets consolidated on individual tracts. Today the fleet is often spread across multiple tracts for harvest effort.
- Questions and comments on DNR presentation:
 - About 11 tribes participating in co-management
 - These tribes share 50% of the harvest based on their U&A
 - Tribes usually have some form/agreement to split the share where U&A's overlap
 - Each tribe has a different process to harvest the available pounds
 - All levels of harvesters (new vs. experienced)
 - Wide range of expertise – asks that DNR help to keep people safe, often have state divers right underneath boat which is not safe
 - Understood this meeting to be more policy focused – would like to have technical staff involved
 - Technical discussion will occur more in subgroups; this meeting has more of the technical + policy because the subgroups haven't been set up yet
 - Some tribes use a boat quota system with their own stringent regulations
 - Tribal harvests are confined to U&A, but state can go through entire area to take their quota
 - System seems to not have changed much over time
 - How does the compliance/enforcement work for the state?
 - DNR divers are doing monitoring and compliance on each tract each day (doing sampling, watching for high-grading, etc.), WDFW does enforcement outside of this
 - Concern that some vessel/diver safety conflicts can occur between tribal and state harvesters when operating in the same vicinity
 - Number of pounds have a time limit within the bid in the auction
 - Puts a heavy burden on the tract
 - Also can make it more unsafe on certain tracts
 - Is the pound/day so high because the state doesn't have enough harvesters?
 - Pound/day is just taking the TAC and dividing by the number of available harvest days
 - All are fishing in pulses, the state might be a bigger pulse and contracts have to be set with a timeline
 - Summarize structure of the fishery

- Each region has a total biomass that is a sum of the tracts that have commercial biomass
 - 2.7% is then applied to the total biomass
 - Reduction occurs by reducing the harvest percentage OR removing the biomass of a tract from the total
- Issues of sustainability governed by the Shellfish Implementation Plan (SIP)
 - SIP used to give instructions on how to share the resource with
 - Pre-1994, most of the resource from Seattle to the north was not surveyed or included in the state's harvest
 - From 1994-2004, it was not a sustainable fishery, it was essentially clear-cutting – and now we're dealing with the consequences
 - Sustainability is court ordered by the SIP – concerning that this has not come up
 - Tribes have their own mechanisms related to what is sustainable
 - Who is in charge of this? Who is talking to the tribes about sustainability?
 - Patchwork of authorities but DNR/WDFW speak together on this issue. DNR has some statutory responsibilities while WDFW has a separate, but related set of statutory responsibilities for managing geoduck fishery.

V. Initial identification of challenges to continued sustainable harvest

- From interviews, strategies to address challenges in three buckets:
 - 1) Addressing water quality concerns
 - 2) Look again at restrictions on harvest (proximity to shoreline, depth, regional differences, etc.)
 - Important to incorporate divers' perspectives
 - 3) Surveying additional tracts
- Comments and responses:
 - Potential for working with Canada to address improving water quality issues and standards (sources of pollution),
 - consider what divers can safely do for harvest effort (get input from actual divers/fishermen related to restrictions),
 - look to tribal fishermen for surveys to evaluate and identify tracts (urchin divers, others that could be involved in geoduck surveys)
 - In South Sound, recovery rates have been lower than expected, spending more time on surveys to identify tracts provided a short-term increase in TAC, but didn't help long term because increasing biomass in tracts through more surveys resulted in drawing down biomass more quickly; broodstock geoduck added by aquaculture and why is the wild stock population still doing down?
 - Potential for more marketing and increasing price per pound – create more demand or focus on higher quality product rather than more pounds
 - On new tracts:
 - Areas that are currently closed likely represent the largest area of potential
 - Nothing stopping any parties from prospecting for new tracts – haven't looked extensively for some time in certain locations

- For adjusting existing tracts, there have been updates made
 - Looking for new tracts hasn't always panned out but fishermen and others are good resources for that information
 - Geoduck are long-lived animals with episodic reproduction or recruitment which is creating sustainable management challenges
 - Shallow boundary – developed as eelgrass protection but WDFW has some skepticism that harvesting in the shallows would be effective/productive
 - There is a protective buffer established for eelgrass
 - Even in areas without eelgrass, the shallower areas can be kept as a reproductive reserve (another benefit of not harvesting this area)
- Does water quality include when wastewater treatment plants go offline?
 - No need to limit the scope of the considerations
 - Does current evaluation consider point and non-point sources of pollution on water quality for geoduck?
- We are bound to import/export (NSSP) rules that would limit harvesting in closed areas
 - Individual tribes have gone down the road of looking at changes to non-point pollution issues, but this was not fruitful (requires infrastructure upgrades, etc.)
 - Top 30 feet of water is what is polluted – geoduck sampled in 2006 were not contaminated (eat for subsistence, harvest for bait)
 - Report on sampling related to human health concerns shared with these notes
 - Explore ways to harvest the clams and get them through polluted waters around Seattle (east central sound)
 - DNR Commissioner is interested in pursuing these issues and understanding the limitations
- There is not much of a resource deeper than 70 feet (was considered ~20 years ago) – not great fitness of geoduck at that depth
- 20 years ago – treaty organized efforts to survey unmapped areas so unlikely to have big swathes of areas with geoduck
- Is there an opportunity to 'purge' geoduck from polluted areas as is done for some forms of aquaculture?
- Interest in opening new areas in east central sound
 - Not many areas that haven't been surveyed or explored in the past
 - There are little pockets, mostly in unclassified areas – huge task to open unclassified areas (for intertidal and subtidal clam harvest)
 - Would be great if DNR would support tribes in this effort with DOH
- Feedback from divers: not just more geoducks, want more high-quality geoducks and to stay shallower (safer and faster)
 - Changes to management where multiple tracts are stitched together to create a large enough tract for commercial harvest can result in restrictions for the entire shoreline based on one section of an eelgrass bed that extends below the -18 ft MLLW – eelgrass is not randomly distributed
 - Can an area be sectioned off that has deeper eelgrass rather than affecting the shallow boundary of the entire tract?

- Concern with bringing geoduck up through polluted waters, look at ISSC regulations as they don't consider the water quality issues to be 3-dimensional
- 200-yd line (codified statute for state harvesters)
 - Creating a problem for sustainability because the TAC calculations are based on areas that are not necessarily accessible to the state
 - Many tracts have 15% or more restricted because of this rule, others are completely inaccessible
 - Raises a safety issue in locations where the 200-yard rule forces boats to anchor in deep water
 - Why can't state divers go within 200-yards?
 - State divers subject to state laws but tribes are able to access resources in this area
 - If new areas were found within 200-yards, it would increase total biomass/allocation but that would still be split 50%
 - 200 yard rule is based on noise issue (private property, bald eagles), but tribes are allowed to be within that area; also county regulations related to noise
 - Also separate laws that govern noise standards
 - This type of dialogue is exactly what the subgroups can address and bring to the task force
 - Can result in having a TAC harvest allocation but no tracts where that allocation can be harvested.

VI. Geoduck population enhancement strategy discussion

- What issues should the subgroups consider on this topic?
 - Genetic issues
 - Shoreline permitting (neighbors/opposition/predator exclusion)
 - Allocations (who pays for the enhancement?, who has access to the resource?)
- Comments and responses:
 - Feasibility studies; mixed success in Canada, we need to know if it really works and where, both economic feasibility and technical feasibility
 - WDFW did some work previously; might be some information to review
 - Feasibility reports shared with these notes
 - Consider an approach of evaluating feasibility based on work in other areas, and then pilot studies before scaling up to larger management decisions
 - Is the aquaculture industry willing to share the methods used on some of the subtidal lands?
 - Tribal interest in geoduck augmentation but understood DNR to be averse to doing this on state-owned aquatic lands
 - Potential to involve industry in the subgroups
 - Likely some publicly available information that would describe some aquaculture methods
 - More of a political issue in the past for DNR. DNR is open to considering a wide range of strategies including evaluating geoduck augmentation.
 - When aquaculture is occurring on private land, DNR is not involved

- DNR would be involved in enhancement and is in favor
 - Lessee is typically responsible for permits; DNR is usually the manager, not the lessee
- Enhancement discussion from chat:
 - Rather than trying to seed a several hundred acre tract, would it make more sense to seed a small area in a strategic location with a very high density of geoduck to see if they could act as seed source?
 - Working term is spawner-cell to support high density augmentation with a goal of localized spawning success
 - I wonder what the ideal depth would be. Given the high density of geoduck in the intertidal zone of south sound inlets, I would be inclined to start around 40' MLLW. I am wondering if the physics between the sperm and eggs doesn't work as well in the shallows.
 - My guess would be what location is highest density (42 to 53 fsw or so) and I would plant the locations that used to have the highest recruitment with the hopes that recruitment success tracks with successful spawners.
 - Recruitment or density estimate from the early surveys? Some of the estimates we had seem so out of the realm of anything we see now, I am wondering if we are starting to see an allele effect. Maybe Tarang can model some key areas.
 - We use the Cosmo Model from USGS to assess scour and fill along the tidelands (to see loss of clam and crab habitat seasonally) and I have noticed the deeper-water nearshore may behave the same way as the tideland...scour reaches deeper into the subtidal

VII. Working group discussion

- Much of previous discussion to be continued in the subgroups
- Want to get membership and meetings scheduled; looking to get meetings started in February
- Envisioning three different subgroups:
 - Geoduck population enhancement
 - Water quality
 - Harvest restrictions
- Do these subgroups make sense to folks? Others that should be included?
 - Haven't really talked about research, and is a huge elephant in the room
 - Assume that this would be discussed in each of the subgroups
 - Similar to crab team
 - It is probably a bit too early, but it would be good to have a marketability group as well. Not only for the pretty ducks, but for the ugly ducks too.
- Are folks open to aquaculture/industry being involved?
 - No objections
- Suggestion to have a presentation from someone in the aquaculture industry to the sub group
- Give some thought to how to incorporate habitat issues and marketability concerns – separate subgroup or incorporated another way?
- Task force members to identify designees/representatives for subgroups. An initial list was developed during the meeting. Facilitation team will follow up over email to confirm/finalize subgroup participants.

VIII. Action items and close out

- Will work on getting the next meeting on the calendar as soon as possible
- Minutes to be circulated
- Confirm/finalize subgroup participants and begin scheduling subgroup meetings
- Coming out with an arc of discussion for future task force meetings

Geoduck Task Force Proviso

The task force must investigate opportunities to reduce negative impacts to tribal treaty and state geoduck harvest and promote long-term opportunities to expand or sustain geoduck harvest. The task force must provide a report to the commissioner of public lands and the legislature, in compliance with RCW 43.01.036, by December 1, 2024, that includes analysis and recommendations related to the following elements:

- (i) *The feasibility of intervention to enhance the wildstock of geoduck, including reseeding projects;*
- (ii) *Factors that are preventing areas from being classified for commercial harvest of wildstock geoduck or factors that are leading to existing wildstock geoduck commercial tract classification downgrade, and recommendations to sustainably and cost-effectively increase the number and area of harvestable tracts, including:*
 - (A) *Consideration of opportunities and recommendations presented in previous studies and reports;*
 - (B) *An inventory of wastewater treatment plant and surface water runoff point sources impacting state and tribal geoduck harvesting opportunities within the classified commercial shellfish growing areas in Puget Sound;*
 - (C) *A ranking of outfalls and point sources identified in (b)(ii)(B) of this subsection prioritized for future correction to mitigate downgraded classification of areas with commercial geoduck harvest opportunity;*
 - (D) *An inventory of wildstock geoduck tracts that are most impacted by poor water quality or other factors impacting classification;*
 - (E) *Consideration of the role of sediment load and urban runoff, and pathways to mitigate these impacts; and*
 - (F) *Recommendations for future actions to improve the harvest quantity of wildstock geoduck and to prioritize areas that can attain improved classification most readily, while considering the influence of outfalls ranked pursuant to (b)(ii)(C) of this subsection.*