## New England offshore areas will reopen for Atlantic surfclam and ocean quahog fishing

Contact: Maggie Mooney-Seus FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE NOAA Fisheries December 18, 2012 978-281-9175 Ben Sherman National Ocean Service 301-713-3066

Beginning this January, fishermen will be able to target abundant stocks of Atlantic surfclams and ocean quahogs on portions of Georges Bank that have been closed to harvesting for 22 years.

NOAA supported research has led to an U.S. Food and Drug Administration testing program developed with clam harvesters, which determined that levels of a naturally occurring toxin that can cause paralytic shellfish poisoning in humans have been consistently below harmful levels in these shellfish populations. This monitoring and testing will be used to ensure that the shellfish are safe to eat now and as harvesting continues.

"We know that opening this area will provide significant opportunity to ocean quahog and surfclam fishermen," said John Bullard,Northeast regional administrator, NOAA Fisheries. "This may also relieve fishing pressure on the southern component of the Atlantic surfclam stock off the Mid-Atlantic coast, which has declined over the last two decades.

Together, these two shellfish support a multimillion-dollar fishery along the East Coast. Surfclams are the most important commercial clam species harvested in the United States. There are approximately 600 federal ocean quahog and surfclam permit holders, 47 of which were active in this fishery last year.

In 1990, the FDA recommended closing portions of Georges Bank after clams were found with toxin levels that exceeded regulatory limits. The toxin is produced by *Alexandrium fundyense*, a single-celled organism that in high concentrations can form blooms commonly referred to as harmful

algal blooms. Clams concentrate the toxin in their meat, which can cause illness or death if consumed by humans.

"We are pleased that our research, authorized under the Harmful Algal Bloom and Hypoxia Research and Control Act, improved bloom forecasting, and has led to development of a testing protocol that allows clam harvesting from Georges Bank," said Robert Magnien, Ph.D., director, NOAA's Center for Sponsored Coastal Ocean Research. "Partnerships among state and federal agencies, fishermen and researchers are critical to developing more effective tools to protect public health, and minimize economic effects on the fishing industry.

The Interstate Shellfish Sanitation Conference, a collaborative effort involving the shellfish industry, regulatory agencies and academic researchers, formally adopted a two-tiered testing approach for paralytic shellfish poisoning. Fishermen conduct initial onboard screening to detect if the toxin is present and then scientists, at approved laboratories, conduct further testing to ensure toxin levels are within regulatory limits. The FDA will prohibit the sale of clams if toxin levels are deemed unsafe.

"Toxin levels in shellfish on Georges Bank have been very low over the last few years. We are confident that this new testing protocol will serve to protect public health should toxin levels rise again in the future," said Stacey DeGrasse, Ph.D., seafood research coordinator in the FDA's Office of Regulatory Science. "We intend to continue to work closely with NOAA to ensure that the shellfish from this region are harvested safely."

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