

WAPUBLIC HEALTH SYSTEM MONTHLY UPDATE

June 2026



The Washington State Department of Health (DOH) works diligently with Local and Tribal Health Jurisdictions to improve the health and well-being of Washington residents. The WA State Public Health System Monthly Update provides an overview of the key health issues impacting Washington state, and the progress we are making in addressing them.



**Questions about the WA
State Public Health System
Monthly Update?**

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**Protecting
WA Shellfish**



**Immunization
Roadmap**



**Federal
Rulemaking**



Protecting Washington's Shellfish: PSP, Warming Waters, & the PH Response

On June 12, 2026, the Washington State Department of Health (DOH) closed all recreational shellfish harvesting in Hood Canal after laboratory testing confirmed lethal levels of Paralytic Shellfish Poison (PSP) near Union, Washington. The closure spans Hood Canal from Foulweather Bluff and Port Ludlow Bay south — including Port Gamble Bay, Quilcene Bay, Dabob Bay, and Mats Mats Bay — covering Mason, Kitsap, and Jefferson counties.



Figure 1: Hood Canal PSP event
microscopic photo of Alexandrium.
PC: Tracie S. Berry

PSP is a potent marine neurotoxin produced by *Alexandrium*, as shown in Figure 1, a microscopic algae that blooms naturally in Washington's coastal and inland waters. Shellfish accumulate the toxin by filter feeding. PSP has no visible signs — it cannot be detected by sight, smell, or taste; is not destroyed by cooking or freezing; and has no antidote. Symptoms begin within minutes to hours of consumption and can progress from tingling and numbness to paralysis and death. It is only survivable by receiving immediate, emergency medical treatment. DOH currently receives 0–7 confirmed PSP illness reports annually in Washington; the rarity reflects the effectiveness of the monitoring and closure system — not the absence of risk, as lethal PSP levels are detected nearly every year since routine monitoring began in 1957.

DOH's Marine Biotoxin Monitoring Program: How It Works

DOH operates Washington's year-round shellfish safety system, which is among the most robust biotoxin monitoring programs in the nation. Key elements:

- **Biweekly laboratory testing** of shellfish samples at commercial and recreational sites statewide, all processed at DOH's Public Health

Laboratory in Shoreline.

- **Closures triggered** when PSP exceeds the federal FDA regulatory threshold of 80 µg of toxin per 100 g of shellfish tissue.
- The **online Shellfish Safety Map** is updated in real time based on toxin levels and **24-hour public hotline** (1-800-562-5632)
- **SoundToxins early-warning network**: trained volunteers collect phytoplankton samples between DOH's scheduled testing cycles, alerting DOH when *Alexandrium* levels approach bloom thresholds — enabling faster closures.

A Warming Ocean Is Raising the Stakes

The June 2026 Hood Canal closure does not occur in isolation. Scientists have documented a clear link between **rising ocean surface temperatures** and the expanded geographic range, longer bloom seasons, and greater frequency of harmful algal blooms including *Alexandrium*. Research using sea-surface temperature records from 1982 to 2016 found significant increases in *Alexandrium* bloom duration across the Salish Sea —

the marine ecosystem that includes Puget Sound, the Strait of Juan de Fuca, and the Georgia Basin.

El Niño conditions contribute additional warming to Pacific coastal and inland waters, compressing the cold-water buffer that typically limits *Alexandrium* growth in Puget Sound. During El Niño years, warmer-than-normal sea surface temperatures extend bloom-favorable windows earlier in the spring and later into the fall — increasing both the frequency and unpredictability of PSP events. Climate change projections suggest these conditions will become more common over time, not less.

DOH notes that biotoxin levels can rise quickly and remain dangerously high for extended periods — and then drop just as suddenly. No reliable real-time predictor currently exists for when a bloom will intensify. NOAA is actively developing forecasting prototypes for Washington waters, but prevention through monitoring and rapid closure remains the primary public health tool.

What’s at Stake: Economy, Tribes, and Public Health

Shellfish harvest contributes approximately **\$180 million to Washington’s economy annually** and supports roughly **3,200 jobs** — with commercial shellfish production ranking as the second-largest private employer in Mason and Pacific counties. Washington is the nation’s **#1 producer of farmed clams, oysters, and mussels**. Closures, as seen at the Hood Canal in Union, WA last month in Figure 2, caused by PSP directly interrupt this industry, affecting harvesters, processors, and coastal communities. The stakes are especially high for **Washington’s 24 treaty tribes**, who hold court-affirmed rights to 50 percent of naturally occurring shellfish in Puget Sound under the 1994 Rafeedie Decision. For many Tribal nations, shellfish harvesting is not merely economic — it is a matter of cultural identity, subsistence, and sovereignty. PSP closures directly interrupt treaty-protected harvests and ceremonial practices that have continued for thousands of years.



Figure 2: Hood Canal Closure in May 2026. PC: Tracie S. Berry

The Federal Partnership Behind Washington’s Safety System

DOH’s shellfish safety and water quality work is supported by EPA’s **National Estuary Program (NEP)**, which funds Puget Sound recovery through the Puget Sound Partnership. DOH serves as the **Shellfish Strategic Initiative Lead** under the NEP — the only state public health agency in the country holding this role. Since 2010, Congress has appropriated over **\$350 million** in Clean Water Act Section 320 funds for Puget Sound, enabling DOH to fund local Pollution Identification and Correction programs, reopen degraded shellfish beds, and maintain the biotoxin monitoring system that issued the June 12th Hood Canal closure.

Between 2007 and 2019, NEP-supported water quality improvements resulted in a **net gain of more than 6,400 acres** of previously closed Puget Sound shellfish beds being upgraded or reopened.

Sustained federal investment in this program directly supports both the public health infrastructure that prevents PSP illness and the clean-water conditions that reduce bacterial closures.

What We’re Watching / Requests to Congress

- **Sustain NEP and Clean Water Act Section 320 funding.** Any reduction would directly curtail DOH’s capacity to operate biotoxin monitoring, fund local pollution correction programs, and meet shellfish bed recovery targets.

- **Invest in NOAA HAB forecasting for the Salish Sea.** Improved early-warning tools would allow DOH to issue public advisories faster and deploy sampling resources more efficiently as El Niño and warming conditions drive more frequent bloom events.
- **Protect Tribal treaty rights through clean water.** Federal investment in Puget Sound water quality is inseparable from the federal government’s trust responsibility to Washington’s 24 treaty tribes.



Building a Shared Vision for Immunization in Washington: A Roadmap Preview

Vaccines remain one of the most effective tools for protecting communities from preventable diseases, yet immunization rates in Washington and across the nation continue to face significant challenges, as shown in Figure 3. To address these trends, DOH is working with partners across the state to develop a comprehensive **4-year Immunization Roadmap**; a shared strategy designed to increase immunization coverage and strengthen Washington's immunization system.

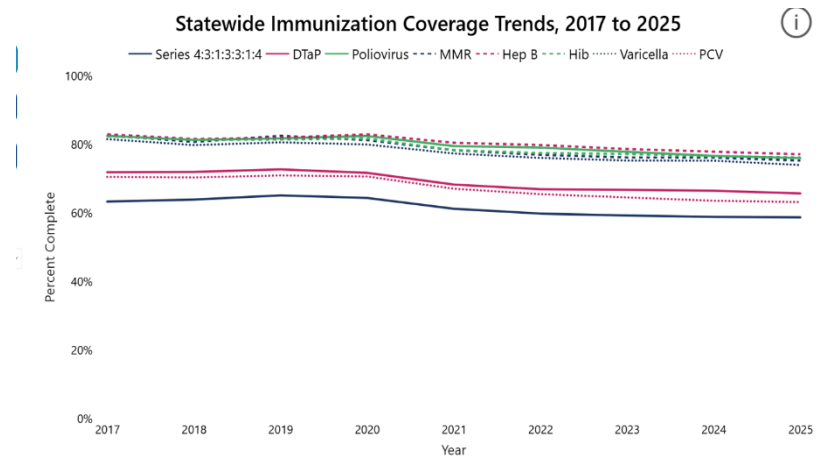


Figure 3: WAIS Vaccine Data for 19-35-Month Olds

The Immunization Roadmap was identified as a priority through Secretary of Health Dennis Worsham's statewide [Listening and Learning Tour](#), where community members, providers, local health jurisdictions, Tribes, and public health partners consistently highlighted the importance of rebuilding confidence in vaccines and ensuring equitable access to immunization services. Rather than serving as a DOH-only initiative, the roadmap is being developed as a collaborative framework that reflects the expertise and priorities of partners working directly with communities across Washington.

Over the past several months, DOH has engaged a broad coalition of stakeholders including local health jurisdictions, Tribal partners through government to government, the Washington State Hospital Association, Immunize Washington Coalition, Vax Northwest, the Washington Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics, health care providers, and community-based organizations. More than 300 individuals participated in a statewide survey, supplemented by listening sessions designed to gather perspectives from those closest to the work.

Several priorities emerged consistently across partner groups. Stakeholders emphasized the need to expand mobile vaccination services, such as the Care-a-Van program, to reach rural and underserved communities. Participants also highlighted the importance of investing in community-based outreach and education efforts to strengthen vaccine confidence, supporting school and childcare vaccination initiatives, and providing health care providers with additional education, quality improvement resources, and operational support.

Early analysis of survey responses, listening sessions, after-action reports, and existing immunization assessments identified 5 key themes that will serve as the foundation for the roadmap:

- Strengthening vaccine confidence through trusted, science-based communication and community engagement.
- Improving equitable access to immunization services, particularly in rural, underserved, and higher-risk communities.
- Supporting providers with clinical resources, training opportunities, and operational assistance.
- Enhancing data systems, measurement tools, and information sharing to support decision-making and program improvement.
- Sustaining the public health infrastructure, workforce, and policy environment needed to support immunization programs over the long term.

These themes reflect a growing recognition that improving vaccination coverage requires coordinated action across multiple sectors. The roadmap aims to align these efforts into a shared statewide strategy focused on directing resources toward communities at highest risk for vaccine-preventable disease outbreaks, expanding mobile vaccination access, and strengthening community- and provider-driven vaccination strategies.

Washington’s efforts to strengthen and modernize its immunization system come at a time of growing concern about long-term vaccine access and affordability. In June, the Washington Vaccine Association (WVA) called on members of Washington’s congressional delegation to help preserve federal support for childhood vaccine distribution costs after the CDC announced that universal vaccine states would be expected to assume costs previously covered by the federal government. According to WVA, the policy change could increase annual program costs by approximately \$1 million, placing additional strain on Washington’s nationally recognized Universal Vaccine Purchase Program.

These changes highlight a broader challenge facing immunization programs nationwide: ensuring that every child can continue to receive recommended vaccines regardless of insurance status or ability to pay. As Washington advances its State Immunization Roadmap, maintaining sustainable funding for vaccine infrastructure—including purchasing, distribution, provider support, and data systems—will be critical to protecting equitable access, sustaining high immunization coverage, and preventing future outbreaks.



Federal Rulemaking: Ensuring Washington’s Public Health Voice is Heard

Federal regulations shape many aspects of public health practice, from disease surveillance and health information technology to maternal and child health, environmental health, Medicaid, and nutrition programs. During the first half of 2026, federal agencies have issued an unprecedented volume of proposed rules, policy guidance, and program changes, often with compressed public comment periods. This accelerated pace has increased the need for timely analysis and coordination across the DOH and our public health partners.

The impact of federal rulemaking extends well beyond regulatory compliance. Federal regulations influence the social, environmental, and health system factors that shape population health outcomes. Changes to health care access, environmental protections, disease surveillance requirements, food and nutrition programs, and public health data systems can affect the ability of communities to prevent illness, access care, and respond to emerging threats. Through the rulemaking process, states have an opportunity to identify unintended consequences, highlight implementation challenges, and advocate for policies that advance

health equity and improve health outcomes.

Over the past year, DOH has submitted comments on a wide range of federal proposals, including changes affecting maternal and child health data collection, health information technology standards, HIV prevention surveillance, WIC administration, environmental health protections, and federal drug pricing programs. These comments ideally help federal agencies understand how proposed policies may affect Washington residents, Tribal partners, local health jurisdictions, health care providers, and public health programs; in some cases it is not clear whether humans are in the loop at federal agencies on reviewing public comments to proposed federal rulemaking.

Transparency is a key part of this work. To support public health partners and stakeholders, DOH posts all submitted comments on the [Federal Rulemaking | Healthier Washington Collaboration Portal](#) which includes summaries of proposed rules, agency comment letters, and other federal engagement resources. By making these materials publicly available, we provide insight into emerging federal policy issues and create opportunities for partners to stay informed about changes that could affect public health practice across Washington.

Looking ahead, DOH is actively monitoring several proposed federal rules with comment periods in July and August. These include proposals related to immigration and public health administration, such as changes to [alien change-of-address reporting requirements](#) and [medical examination requirements](#) for individuals seeking visas or immigration benefits. The agency is also tracking a proposed regulation governing [federal financial assistance programs](#), which could have implications for federally funded public health activities. In environmental health, DOH is reviewing proposals that would [extend compliance deadlines](#) for drinking water standards addressing perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA) and perfluorooctane sulfonate (PFOS), while also evaluating a separate proposal that would [rescind regulatory determinations](#) for several additional PFAS compounds, including PFHxS, PFNA, and GenX chemicals. These examples illustrate the broad range of federal actions that can influence public health practice, environmental protections, health equity, and access to services in Washington.

Federal rulemaking is an important way states can help influence national policy. In 2020, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services proposed a rule that would have established a process for reviewing and potentially expiring certain existing regulations. As federal agencies continue to issue a high volume of proposed rules and policy changes, DOH remains focused on monitoring developments, evaluating potential impacts on Washington's public health system, and ensuring the state remains engaged in the federal rulemaking process. Thoughtful, evidence-based comments help ensure that federal decisions are informed by on-the-ground public health experience and the unique needs of Washington communities. As the pace of federal policymaking continues to accelerate, DOH remains committed to monitoring developments, elevating public health expertise, and ensuring Washington's voice is represented throughout the federal decision-making process.

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