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# CHINOOK OBSERVER

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## Covid shots climb as cases spike

### County death toll rises to 16 people

By BRANDON CLINE  
*Chinook Observer*

PACIFIC COUNTY — Vaccinations in Pacific County were the highest they had been in almost two months last week, as covid-19 con-

tinues to spread rapidly throughout all areas of the county.

Last week, Pacific County finally crossed the 50% threshold for its total population being at least partially vaccinated against the disease. But cases continue to rise at an alarming rate, with another 57 cases reported in Pacific County from Aug. 2 to 9 and the county's pandemic death toll rising to 16, the third consecutive week a death has

been reported in the county.

Hospitalizations also jumped from 47 to 54, the most in a one-week span for Pacific County since the pandemic began. The county's case rate per 100,000 people over 14 days sat at 462 as of Aug. 7, up from 335 a week ago and the highest it has been since December.

For much of the pandemic, a supermajority of total cases have been reported in people who reside

in north county. In recent weeks, however, people in south county are making up the bulk of newly reported cases. From July 21 to Aug. 4, 65 of the 88 cases with a listed address resided in south county, including 20 cases in Long Beach, 17 in Ocean Park and 13 in Naselle.

County health director Katie Lindstrom said the delta variant is fueling the sharp rise in cases, with more cases being traced back

to workplaces and not just mostly within households.

"What people are hearing about delta being a lot more contagious is absolutely playing out locally," Lindstrom said. "Typically, when we have a positive case, it used to be that maybe one or two people would maybe catch it. Now, it's many more people."

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### Hardy commercial diggers sustain long tradition

# BIG RISK, BIG CLAMS



By LUKE WHITTAKER  
*Chinook Observer*

WILLAPA SPITS — On isolated, shifting spits in seemingly perpetual fog, some dig their living from the sand.

Razor clammers each collected about 110 pounds per day on average last season, but diggers are finding more clams and a more favorable market this year, making for some memorable days for the relatively small group who work the detached Willapa Spits off the north end of the Long Beach Peninsula.

"At \$3.75 per pound, I've never made more money this quickly," said Les Strange, 58, of Raymond, standing over a 50-quart cooler of clams. After averaging \$2.20 in 2020, commercial diggers like Strange are hopeful the current market demand will continue.

"That's pretty much what I do for a living all year. It's back-breaking work, but you get in shape. You get out what you put into it. You can't

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Despite the seasonal disruptions, dedicated diggers return year after year, like David Tegen, 68, of Westport. Tegen has been clamming for decades, he said.



A bucket full of razor clams collected along the Willapa Spit. Last season, commercial razor clammers each collected about 110 pounds per day on average.

#### LEARN HOW

See [wdfw.wa.gov/fishing/commercial/razor-clam](http://wdfw.wa.gov/fishing/commercial/razor-clam) to learn how to become a commercial digger.



Participation among licensed commercial clammers in Washington has declined over the past five years, from 132 diggers in 2015, to 68 in 2020 to just 29 this year. An aging workforce and seasonal disruptions due to domoic closures are considered the primary reasons.

## Talks ignite interest in fireworks clampdown

### Countywide limits not possible until July 2023

By BRANDON CLINE  
*Chinook Observer*

PACIFIC COUNTY — Cognizant of past failures to clamp down on the sale and use of consumer fireworks around the Fourth of July weekend, local officials are continuing onward with a coordinated effort to take action on the hot-button issue.

At an Aug. 4 meeting to discuss adopting fireworks restrictions, Pacific County, Long Beach, Ilwaco, Raymond and South Bend officials agreed to keep the process

See Fireworks, Page A9

## New state police reform laws generate questions

### Mental-health interventions are a key issue here

By JEFF CLEMENS  
*For the Observer*

PACIFIC COUNTY — Two Washington state police reform bills, House Bill 1054 and House Bill 1310, went into effect on July 25 and have generated questions in law enforcement agencies across the state. Among those has been the Long Beach Police Department, where Chief Flint Wright is still trying to make sense of the laws that were passed this past spring.

Police now must exercise "reasonable care" before they can use force, including deadly force; background checks for hiring officers have been strengthened;

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## Sailor wants to save aircraft carrier — in Astoria

### Ocean Park man says historical attraction would generate revenue

By PATRICK WEBB  
*For the Observer*

OCEAN PARK — A retired sailor campaigning to save the USS Kitty Hawk aircraft carrier from the scrapyards is pressing ahead seeking support.

Veteran Bill Nix divides his time between homes in

Ocean Park and Underwood on the Washington side of the Columbia River Gorge.

He was billeted on the supercarrier during a varied career that included civilian service as a police officer, legal clerk, judge and parole officer, in addition to his active-duty and lengthy reserve service with the U.S. Navy and Army. "It was a really good ship," said Nix, a Navy photographer who served two tours in Vietnam and retired as a master-at-

arms/chief petty officer.

He believes it could attract 325,000 visitors a year if preserved and docked permanently in Astoria as a conference center and museum. "It's in fairly good condition," Nix said. "It hasn't deteriorated."

However, the U.S. Kitty Hawk Veterans Association has reluctantly ended its campaign to save the ship and Astoria-area leaders have given him little encouragement.

The association, with 1,200 members scattered throughout the United States, asked the Navy to try to preserve it in 2001. It secured pledges of \$5 million.

When officers rejected this idea, reportedly because it was not among ships listed for possible preservation, the group's leadership changed direction. In a recent newsletter, its president, Jim Melka of Independence,

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U.S. NAVY PHOTO/PH2 WILLIAM H. RAMSEY

The USS Kitty Hawk, one of the last oil-fired aircraft carriers, sails past some Japanese fishing boats in this U.S. Navy file photo from more than a dozen years ago. An Ocean Park man is trying to save the ship from being scrapped. Bill Nix believes it could become a museum and Astoria would be an ideal location.





## Diggers

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beat that," said Strange, adding that he hoped to dig 250 pounds that day.

### High risk, reward

In Pacific County, the commercial harvest is allowed only on the Willapa Spits, located within the mouth of Willapa Bay. The sand spits, only accessible by boat, present unique challenges and opportunities for commercial diggers each season. The relatively small area has abundant clam numbers and accounts for an out-sized portion of the state's commercial clamming.

"For the past 10 years, they've accounted for about 35% of the [commercial] harvest. Just this little area in the spits is a pretty big producer," said Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife coastal shellfish biologist Zach Forster during a recent patrol of the grounds in late July.

The reward, however, doesn't come without risk. In order to reach the area, diggers must arrive by boat, since it's illegal to drive on the beaches leading to where the sand spits begin. Clammers come on small skiffs, often relying on GPS plotters to navigate through the heavy fog that frequently blankets the area.

"It only occurs on the detached spits of Willapa Bay. The only way diggers can access the spits are by boat.



WDFW biologist Zach Forster, left, talks with commercial clammer Les Strange, center, as WDFW shellfish manager Dan Ayres inspects clams.

Its boat-in only, which limits any potential interaction with driving on the beach or [bird] nesting," Forster said.

The shifting sand spits are several hundred yards from the peninsula, and sometimes disappear underwater depending on the tides.

"They're probably under 6 to 10 feet at high tide. It's breaking surf on the spits typically. It's all sub-tidal. They change from year to year. One area of the spits that's good digging might not even show the next year," Forster said.

### Diggers dwindle

Participation among licensed commercial clam-

mers in Washington has declined over the past five years, from 132 diggers in 2015, to 68 in 2020 to just 29 this year. Scores of commercial diggers once ranged the sands of Pacific and Grays Harbor counties.

An aging workforce and seasonal disruptions due to domoic closures are considered the primary reasons for the drop in participation.

The season typically starts in April and lasts about eight weeks, but was delayed until July this year due to a common neurotoxin.

"We had a late start this year because of issues with domoic acid. The same that

affected the recreational beaches also affected the clams on the Willapa Spits. We continued to test from March clear through July, when we got our two good [back to back] samples to open," Forster said. "July 2nd we got the green light from the Department of Health and we announced the opening date from July 10 running through Aug. 31, with the possibility of extending the fishery into September."

Despite the seasonal disruptions, dedicated diggers return year after year, like David Tegen, 68, of Westport. On his best day, Tegen once dug 389 pounds. But on a Wednesday morning in late July, he had more moderate goals.

"I like to get up around 200 (pounds) or better," he said. "But my age is catching up with me."

### Evolving razor clam market

In 2020, Pacific County accounted for 71% of the statewide commercial clam harvest, followed by Grays Harbor with 25%. The fishery landed 184,379 pounds of clams last year during an 87-day season, representing an ex-vessel value of about \$415,000, the fifth highest on record.

A majority of the commercial clam harvest historically



Commercial clammer Les Strange, 58, of Raymond, describes the motion he uses to collect clams with his left hand after breaking his right hand years ago.



Many commercial clammers use baskets to hold their clams as they dig.



Joshua Van Hess pulls a clam from the sand Wednesday, July 28 near Willapa Spits.

went to the commercial bait market, where they're a popular choice for everything from Dungeness crab to surf perch.

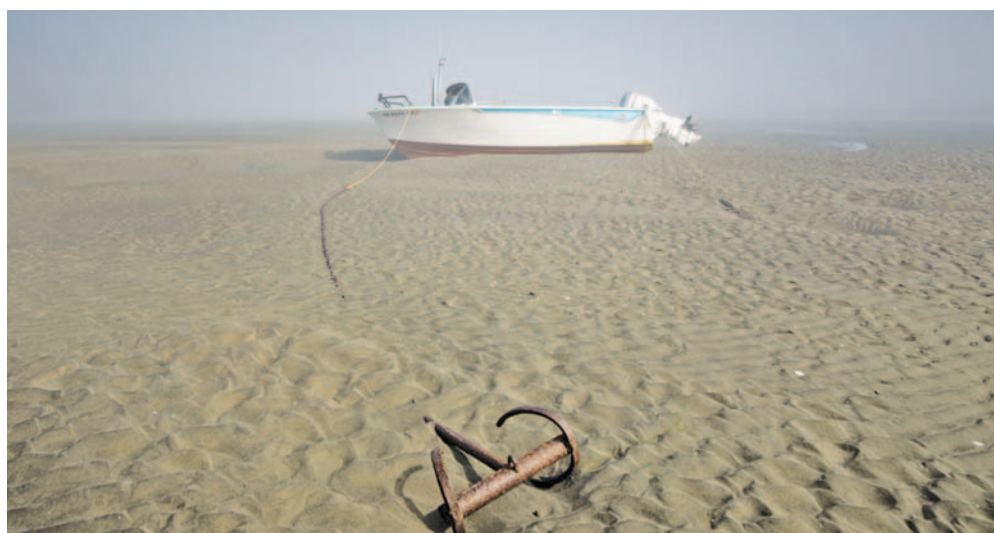
"A reason a good majority have been sold to the crab market is because, if you talk to a commercial crabber, they'll tell you razor clams are the best bait. They're going to get sold where the demand is," Forster said.

Lately however, a growing percentage is destined for the fresh seafood market, as much as 40%. Many local seafood retailers and restaurants now have razor clams

readily in stock or featured on menus. Commercial-harvested Pacific razor clams are considered a "best choice" among sustainable seafood, according to Seafood Watch.

"Their population is mostly driven by natural mortality and recruitment, not the recreational or commercial harvest," Forster said.

And by the way, preliminary population surveys on the peninsula's ocean beach indicate strong numbers for this coming fall's digs — if domoic levels stay below 20 parts per million.



In Pacific County, the commercial harvest is allowed only on the Willapa Spits, located at the mouth of Willapa Bay. The sand spits, only accessible by boat, present unique challenges and opportunities to commercial diggers each season.

## Carrier

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Iowa, lamented, "It looks as if we have lost the battle to save the ship."

"We are trying to find a location to set up a *USS Kitty Hawk* museum," the group told members online. "More details will be forthcoming, but association leadership is considering everything from a place on *USS Midway* on the West Coast to a building in Kitty Hawk, N.C., on the East Coast, and everywhere in between."

### 'Too much' to handle?

Nix pointed to the *Midway*, a carrier in San Diego, as an example of how a community can preserve history while creating a lucrative tourist attraction. His research suggests that 1.3 million visitors annually pump \$4.7 million into Southern California. Other retired fighting ships attract visitors in Bremerton and elsewhere in California and the Atlantic coast.

He estimates potential visitor counts on the North Coast might reach one-quarter of *Midway's* numbers — resulting in \$1 million revenue.

Astoria-area leaders who replied to Nix's campaign offered unanimous respect for preserving the nation's military history. But their consensus was that installing a 1,069-foot aircraft carrier on the Astoria waterfront and coping with the influx of

visitors would overwhelm the community.

Bruce Jones, mayor of Astoria, is deputy director of the Columbia River Maritime Museum. He replied to Nix in March that the museum is focused on the \$1.15 million dry-docking of the 128-foot *Lightship Columbia*. "I'm afraid our museum does not have an appetite for taking on a project of such exponentially larger proportions and logistical requirements," he wrote.

He noted as mayor he would be interested in learning of others' interest, but added, "An attraction that could generate an additional 400,000 annual visitors might be seen as *too much* of a good thing, because of the additional infrastructure required to support so many visitors in a town of only 10,000."

He warned that deferred maintenance costs and the costs associated with docking the ship would have to be factored in.

### 'Overburdened' highways

In his reply to Nix, David Reid, executive director of the Astoria-Warrenton Area Chamber of Commerce, pointed to the brief Astoria stopover of the *USS Missouri* in 1998. The historic battleship, site of the Japanese 1945 World War II surrender, was being towed from Bremerton to become a museum in Hawaii. The crowds and accompanying

### ABOUT THE CARRIER

The *USS Kitty Hawk*, nicknamed "Battle Cat," was launched in 1961 and served missions in Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq. Its designations were CVA-63 and CV-63. Some 40 fighter-bombers plus five helicopters and eight other planes could be deployed from its decks. It is 282 feet wide and draws 38 feet.

Ship histories note the U.S. used it in 1963 to test whether high-altitude U2 reconnaissance aircraft — key early assets in the Cold War — could be launched from a carrier. Stories also highlight how it hit a Russian submarine near Japan in 1984. Its final mission was in Japan.

traffic chaos demonstrated how the North Coast could not cope, he wrote.

"Since those days we have expanded operations and land use at the port, redeveloped other waterfront buildings, increased our year-round (and especially summertime) visitorship, and increased our population," wrote Reid. "The roads leading to and from town, however, have not widened a single lane and are already overburdened on busy weekends."

Reid said in his discussions with maritime and government leadership, all agreed that the ship should be preserved for future generations to enjoy. But he added, "This is an eminent worthy project that is simply out-sized for our community."

Like Jones, he cited additional needs. "It's that the presence of something this large and, shall we say, magnetic, would change the character of this town to its detriment and that's only if we could somehow squeeze that

much dock, hotel, highway, parking and visitor space out of a peninsula that has been basically fully built-out since the 1960s."

### Deadline approaching

Nix is not deterred and is seeking support from elected leaders. He has received replies from the offices of U.S. Sens. Ron Wyden (D-Ore.) and Patty Murray (D-Wash.) plus Oregon state Rep. Suzanne Weber (R-Tillamook), whose House District 32 includes the North Coast. "I am trying to spread the word and hope we can get some state resolutions," said Nix, who is encouraged by the belief that federal matching funds could help with costs.

He said it is important to save the *Kitty Hawk* because it is the last of the oil-fired carriers. Later nuclear-powered craft may be less likely to be saved for private use because they pose potential contamination issues. "There are only two supercarriers

left," Nix said. "Once they are gone, they are gone."

But the clock may be ticking.

The carrier was decommissioned in 2009 at a ceremony Nix attended. It is docked at Puget Sound Naval Shipyard in Bremerton amid other unwanted military vessels. The *Kitsap Sun* newspaper, which covered the association's unsuccessful campaign to save it, noted that will likely be sold for scrap. Since 2014, surplus carriers *Constellation*, *Ranger* and *Independence* have been towed around the tip of South America to ship-breaking yards in Brownsville, Texas, on the Gulf Coast, the newspaper has reported.

The latest action in April was a thorough exterior cleaning so its hull will not carry invasive species when it is moved. No scrap bids

have been announced, the newspaper reported.

### Some support

However, Nix is not entirely alone.

When his project was highlighted in the *Astorian's* In One Ear column earlier this year, it was enthusiastically supported by Seaside resident Nguyen Trung, who noted the size of the vessel, including its 4.5-acre flight deck, would be its attraction. "This offers limitless potential for usage: restaurants, stores, festivals, museum, garden, park, lodging, conference rooms, theater, sports, etc."

Trung highlighted the manner in which the *Queen Mary*, a 1936 luxury British cruise ship, had been preserved in Long Beach, California. "What a cool idea," Trung added. "I do hope this gem will be saved."

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