



Gateway photos/Lee Giles III

Taylor Shellfish workers run to stow geoduck farming equipment on a barge before the incoming tide covers the beach with water.

# Growing controversy

# Lakebay geoduck farm piques profits, concerns

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**D**ark clouds hovered over Case Inlet. A cold rain, initially just a few sprinkles, intensified, hurtled along by brisk winds. Against the incoming squall, workmen hustled bags of barnacled PVC tubes off the south Key Peninsula beach onto an awaiting barge.

Beyond them, hundreds of thousands of geoduck clams lay burrowed up and down nearly 12 acres of sandy beach owned by the Foss family. By last Thursday, workers had plucked thousands of tubes from one large section of beach before covering it over again with a large net, anchored down by bolts of rebar.

Beneath the net's fine mesh could be seen the ends of several geoduck siphons, resting partially exposed atop the slimy beach surface.

"The geoducks get a false sense of security" protected by the pipes, explained Brian Phipps, site manager for Taylor Shellfish Company. "We'll leave the nets on for another year."

They won't be alone.

To the north, acres of beach are similarly covered. Some patches cover uneven rows of PVC pipe. Other sections are flat.

Located on the shoreline north of Joemma Beach State Park, the Foss property is one of two active geoduck farms on Key Peninsula and in Pierce County.

Initially planted in 2000, the beach hosts up to 35,000 tubes per acre, beneath which three geoducks (or simply "ducks" in beach worker parlance) are planted.

Here, the ducks are planted in stag-



Nets cover the geoduck PVC pipes to protect them from predators.

gered, four-year cycles — two years with tubes, two years without. At harvest, they average about 1.8 pounds apiece.

Native to the Pacific Northwest, the geoduck is the world's largest burrowing clam and one at the center of an unlikely debate. The popularity of geoduck has taken off in recent years, particularly in China and Japan, where it can wholesale for \$10 to \$14 per pound.

Traditionally harvested from wild, underwater beds, geoduck have been grown in recent years in inter-tidal beach farms. Commercial growers like Taylor have sought leases from state's Department of Natural Resources or private beach owners. Such leases have become an increasingly attractive option for the latter, who turn to geoduck farming as a way to offset rising property taxes.

According to Bill Dewey, Taylor Shellfish spokesman, people like the Foss family who lease their property

are offered 10 percent of the yield, plus \$1,000 per acre every year.

However, beyond the per-acre rate, there are no profit guarantees.

Some plantings have been wiped out by conditions such as too much freshwater runoff from the upland, something geoducks can't tolerate.

"The owner takes some of the risk," Dewey said.

## Trouble in paradise

Even on such a gloomy afternoon, the Foss' section of beach allows for some breathtaking views. The beach is wide, with soft gray sand. To the north, a few cottages stand out against a background of lush green.

Simply put, it's a beautiful spot, one that has served as the Foss family's summer retreat for years.

But the area is also home to several full- and part-time residents who complain the farm has changed their little beach community for the worse

over the past seven years. Ask them, and they can cite a long list of grievances — everything from the tubes and nets washed up on their beaches to crews working late at night, disturbing their sleep.

Sherilee Luedtke has lived just north of the Foss property for 22 years. Since the farm's application was approved, in 2000, she's noticed some unwelcome changes, from the aesthetic to the ecological.

Worse, she said, neighbors have noticed considerable erosion of the beach north of the farm in recent years, which could threaten some adjacent homes.

"Everyone down here that has two eyes can tell that the sand spit is growing," she said. "We are not saying the geoduck operation caused it, we're saying something has changed."

A coastal geologist is being hired to study the condition of the beach, Luedtke said.

Citing beach erosion among numerous other grievances, Luedtke penned a letter to Pierce County Planning and Land Services last month, calling for termination of the Foss permit.

According to Luedtke, the permit was granted by the Pierce County Hearing Examiner for five years, with option to renew for a sixth.

In her letter she charged that conditions have not been met, citing a number of issues, including late removal of PVC tubes, the presence of workers late at night, and a quicksand-like effect on the beach following harvest of geoducks by workers who use water jets that liquefy the beach.

"It's not the PR image that they give you," Luedtke said. "We are gonna fight the continuation of the permit." She's not alone.

Several of Foss' neighbors who appeared Monday before the Pierce County Council's Community Development Committee hearing on proposed geoduck regulations blasted the Foss farm.

Neighbor John McCormick blamed the farm for erosion of the bluff on which his house sits and suggested the committee add site-specific analysis of "beach hydraulics" to the regulations.

Wendy Kettering, who also lives near Foss, blamed the farm for blighting the tranquility that brought her to the neighborhood in the first place.

"There's nothing passive about it," she said.

## Industry demonized?

The county has apparently asked Taylor to re-submit a shoreline development permit later this month.

Dewey said the five-year limit came as a surprise, but he added that the company was not contacted in 2005.

"We certainly would not have planted millions of dollars of geoduck at Foss if we thought there was a termination associated with the permit," he wrote in an e-mail.

Taylor currently has six other applications pending for farms on the Key Peninsula. A half-acre farm to the north is expected to be planted this summer.

Two more are approved but are appealing conditions.

Seattle Shellfish has had an active farm in Whitman Cove since 1998.

Dewey disputed several neighbors' claims, particularly that crews work around the clock seven days a week and that harvesting causes lasting sinkholes on the beach — or that soft sands are the result of harvesting.

The spokesman admitted crews did work at night in fall and winter, when tides are lowest.

In the meantime, recent practices, such as blanket netting across large swaths of beach to keep pipes in place, have been enacted in response to neighbors' concerns.

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