

## EPA drops diluted-waste plan

By **Craig Welch**

*Seattle Times staff reporter*

Following complaints from Northwest shellfish growers and threats by some in Congress, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) yesterday abandoned a plan critics said would have encouraged more municipalities to discharge partially treated sewage into streams or bays. Commercial clam, mussel and oyster growers in Washington, already facing increasing pollution threats, rejoiced at the decision.

"A lot of pressure was brought to bear, and I think it's great news for anybody interested in clean water," said Ian Jefferds, whose family founded Whidbey Island's Penn Cove Shellfish. Even some treatment-plant operators who favor the flexibility to discharge partially treated waste weren't disappointed.

"I think going back to the drawing board is fine," said Don Theiler, King County's wastewater director. "If it allows for additional thought and discussion, and if they can allay some fears, that's good."

For two years, the Bush administration has been working on a plan to outline when it is acceptable for wastewater treatment plants to "blend," or dilute, treated sewage with waste that has been disinfected but only partially treated. The combined fluids then are discharged into waterways.

Many wastewater operators insist the practice is a safe way to meet Clean Water Act goals during periods of heavy rain — without spending millions of dollars to increase plant capacity.

But former Gov. Gary Locke and the Washington state Department of Health argued it would allow pathogens not measured under the act to escape treatment, and would force the state to extend closure zones for commercial shellfish growers operating near sewer outfalls.

After environmentalists and shellfish growers in a handful of key coastal states persuaded a bipartisan group in Congress this week to try to kill the proposal, the EPA agreed to "take the policy off the table," said Ben Grumbles, the EPA's assistant administrator for water, in Washington, D.C.

"What's important is to send a signal that we don't view blending as a long-term solution," Grumbles said. "We want to decrease overflows and increase treatment that's cost effective and environmentally sensitive. We're saying dilution is not the solution to pollution."

The practice is common in parts of the country, but less so in Puget Sound. King County's West Point plant off Discovery Park, for example, blends during some storms, but its outflow has to meet Clean Water Act standards. Still, the EPA has never clarified in which instances the practice is legal, so the agency sought a national policy. Its draft of that policy alarmed some, who feared it would have discouraged treatment plants from upgrading deteriorating systems or leaky pipes, because they, instead, could turn to blending waste during storms. Because rain can increase stormwater runoff eight months a year in Puget Sound, state officials thought there would be great pressure in Washington to take that approach. "We don't want to do anything that could potentially increase our exposure to pathogens," said Bill Dewey, with Taylor Shellfish. Washington shellfish growers even put together a list of 13 areas — from Dyes Inlet to Fox Island — where they feared more beds would be closed to harvesting. But Theiler, with King County, said critics misunderstood what drives plant operators.

"I don't think there's any municipality out there just waiting to reduce their level of protection," Theiler said. "Nobody I know wants to do that."