

Quilcene man gets 5½ years in prison; state officials say he and former employees poached \$2 million worth of oysters, clams from beaches, tidelands

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**Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife
Rodney Allan Clark**

EDITOR'S NOTE: This updates the value of the clams and oysters from \$700,000 (originally used by prosecutors) to \$2 million (value placed on them Friday by Fish and Wildlife officials).

SEATTLE — The former owner of a shellfish company based in Jefferson County was sentenced Friday to 5½ years in prison after state Department of Fish and Wildlife investigators said he was the leader of a poaching ring that stole \$2 million worth of oysters and clams from state beaches and tidelands.

Rodney Allan Clark, 50, former owner of now-closed G&R Quality Seafood in Quilcene, had pleaded guilty in King County Superior Court last month to 17 counts of trafficking in stolen property and one count of reckless endangerment for selling shellfish to the public without a state health certification.

Clark was also ordered to return from his prison cell next month for a court hearing to determine restitution for the shellfish he and his employees stole from beaches and tidelands owned by the state and by private individuals in Jefferson and Kitsap counties between 2008 and 2010.

The clams and oysters were valued at \$2 million by Fish and Wildlife officials who called it one of the biggest shellfish trafficking cases ever prosecuted in Washington. Prosecutors originally valued the shellfish at \$700,000.

Eight of Clark's former employees, some of whom cooperated with the investigation, pleaded guilty to misdemeanor fishing violations in previous court appearances and received a combination of fines and jail time.

Charges were originally filed in 2011, and Clark's sentencing Friday marked the end of a high-profile case that was delayed for nearly a year after Clark jumped bail in 2013 and fled the state.

He was finally extradited from Hawaii under a warrant signed by Gov. Jay Inslee the following year.

Court records describe how a tip from a shellfish inspector for the state Department of Health prompted Fish and Wildlife to open its investigation of G&R Quality Seafood in April 2009.

According to the health inspector, a shellfish buyer reported buying thousands of Clark's oysters, which made some of his customers in Yakima and the Tri-Cities sick.

For the next 11 months, Fish and Wildlife detectives developed a case on Clark and his employees, documenting their activities as they illegally harvested shellfish at night on isolated beaches in Jefferson and Kitsap counties.

The detectives also monitored the movement of the stolen shellfish to King County, where Clark and his employees sold it at a profit to restaurants, fish markets and seafood wholesalers.

Fish and Wildlife Police Chief Steve Crown estimates that Clark and his employees illegally harvested more than \$2 million worth of oysters and clams from publicly and privately owned beaches, but said the true value of the stolen shellfish may never be known.

"These poachers stripped entire beaches of oysters and clams, and recklessly sold uncertified shellfish for public consumption," Crown said.

"This was a crime against the people and the natural resources of our state, and we made it a priority to get their ringleader off the street and shut his operation down."

In March 2010, Fish and Wildlife police seized thousands of documents detailing the operations of G&R Quality Seafood after obtaining a warrant to search Clark's office in Quilcene and other properties.

Several other agencies participated in those raids, including the Jefferson County

Sheriff's Office, the National Marine Fisheries Service and the Coast Guard.

Based on the Fish and Wildlife investigation, Clark was charged in King County Superior Court in December 2011, but was released on bail pending trial.

In December 2013, he failed to appear for a pretrial court date, leading to an interstate search that led first to Alaska, then to Hawaii.

Clark, who previously served a prison sentence for drug offenses in Montana, was eventually arrested in Hawaii and extradited to Washington state under a warrant issued last year by Inslee.

"We'd like to thank all the agencies that helped us bring Rodney Allan Clark to justice, particularly the King County Prosecutor's Office," Crown said.

"If the prosecutor hadn't agreed to pursue this case, Rodney Clark would probably still be out on the oyster beds, plundering the state's natural resources."