Whatcom Marine Resources Committee (MRC) 2025 North Chuckanut Bay Pollution Identification and Correction Project Final Report

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Whatcom County Public Works—Natural Resources

Reporting Period: October 2024-September 2025

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Abstract

North Chuckanut Bay is a small embayment located in south Bellingham that has exhibited poor water quality since initial water samples were taken from 1989-1991. In 1994, the bay officially closed for recreational shellfish harvest, and remains closed today. Despite the health advisory and shellfish closure, North Chuckanut Bay has remained a popular location for recreational shellfish harvest. In 2014, the MRC added this location to Whatcom County Public Work's county-wide Pollution Identification and Correction project.

The goal of this project was to provide the Washington State Department of Health with sufficient data demonstrating an improvement in water quality so that recreational shellfish harvesting restrictions may be appropriately modified. To achieve this goal, the MRC conducted monthly water quality sampling events and has continued outreach and education efforts to the local community to encourage best practices and messaging around water quality protection in the bay.

Monthly water quality sampling occurred at 7 freshwater inputs to the bay and at 7 marine locations within the bay. Over the past 10 years, while water quality has shown some improvements at some of the sampling locations, the data have not prompted the Washington State Department of Health to consider an upgrade as many of the sites still do not meet the water quality standards that are necessary to be considered for an upgrade.

Because water quality has not improved at many sites throughout North Chuckanut Bay, the MRC has decided to discontinue water quality sampling after September of 2025. The MRC will be shifting focus to education and outreach efforts, and Whatcom County Natural Resources staff will be developing a technical report synthesizing the findings from over 10 years of water quality monitoring in the bay and outlining recommendations for next steps.

Background

North Chuckanut Bay, often referred to as Mud Bay, is a small embayment in south Bellingham within Whatcom County (see map below). A railroad trestle crosses the mouth of the bay, restricting tidal circulation and preventing adequate flow throughout the bay. The primary freshwater discharge to this bay is Chuckanut Creek, which has a seven square mile watershed. There are also smaller drainages from the residential area on the northwest side of the bay and from a seasonal creek that runs through the City of Bellingham owned Woodstock Farm. Land uses in the Chuckanut Creek watershed include a residential area (Chuckanut Village), a forested park with hiking and biking trails (Arroyo Park), and rural residential and forested areas in the upper watershed.

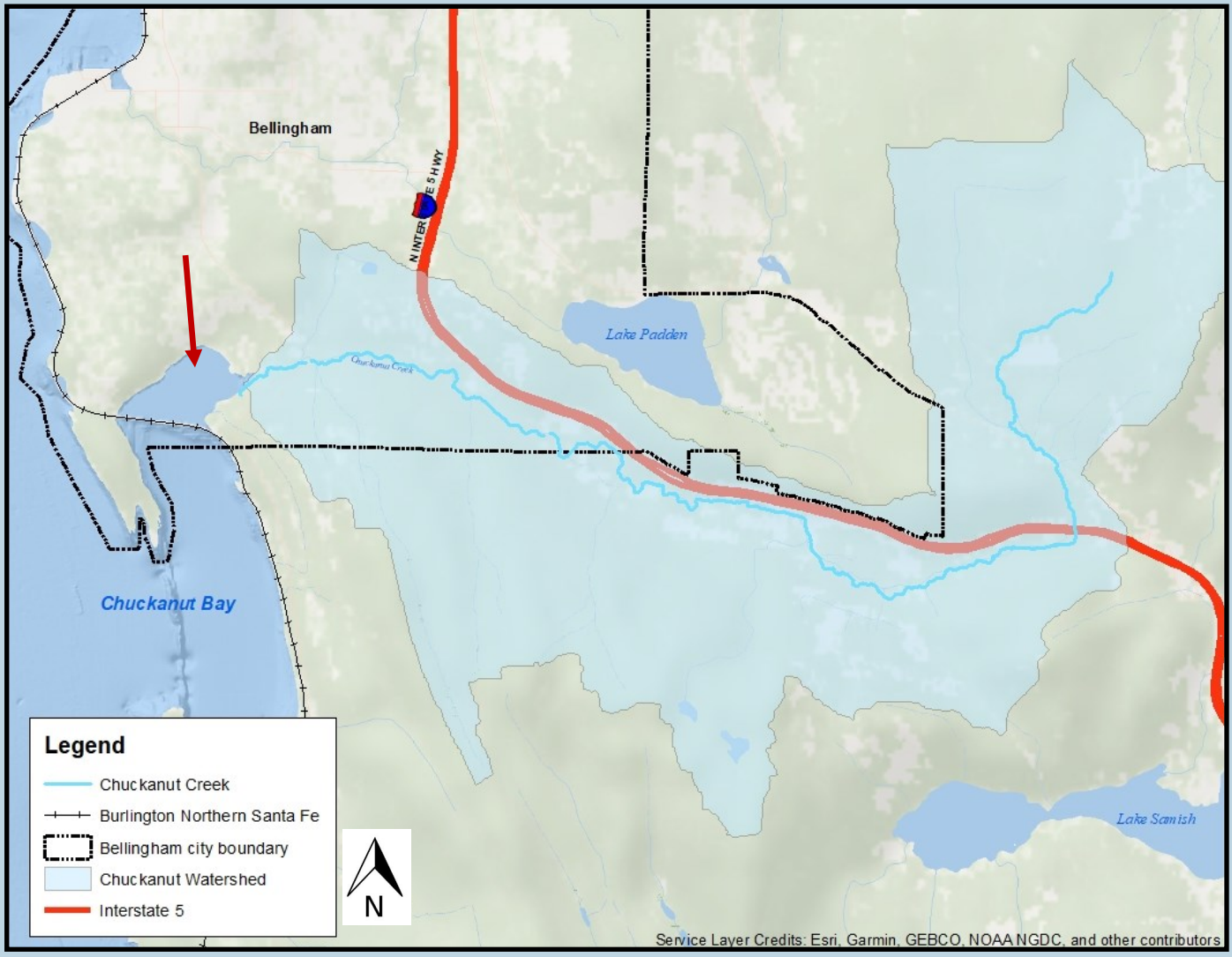

Figure 1: Map of the Chuckanut watershed and surrounding areas. The red arrow points to North Chuckanut Bay.

Background

North Chuckanut Bay is a popular shellfish harvesting area that supports many species of clams. However, there have been concerns about bacteria levels in the bay for over 25 years. Initial water quality samples collected between 1989 and 1991 showed elevated bacteria levels at the sampling station closest to the shellfish harvesting area, just outside the railroad trestle. In 1994, the Washington State Department of Health (WA DOH) conducted a shoreline survey of Chuckanut Bay Park and recommended that the recreational shellfish harvesting area in the bay be closed due to poor water quality conditions. Despite the health advisory and shellfish closure, the area has remained a popular location for recreational shellfish harvest. As capacity allowed, the MRC continued water quality sampling in the freshwater systems flowing into North Chuckanut Bay from 2006-2013. In 2014, the MRC decided to contribute to Whatcom County Public Work's (WCPW) county-wide Pollution Identification and Correction (PIC) project, focusing their efforts in North Chuckanut Bay.

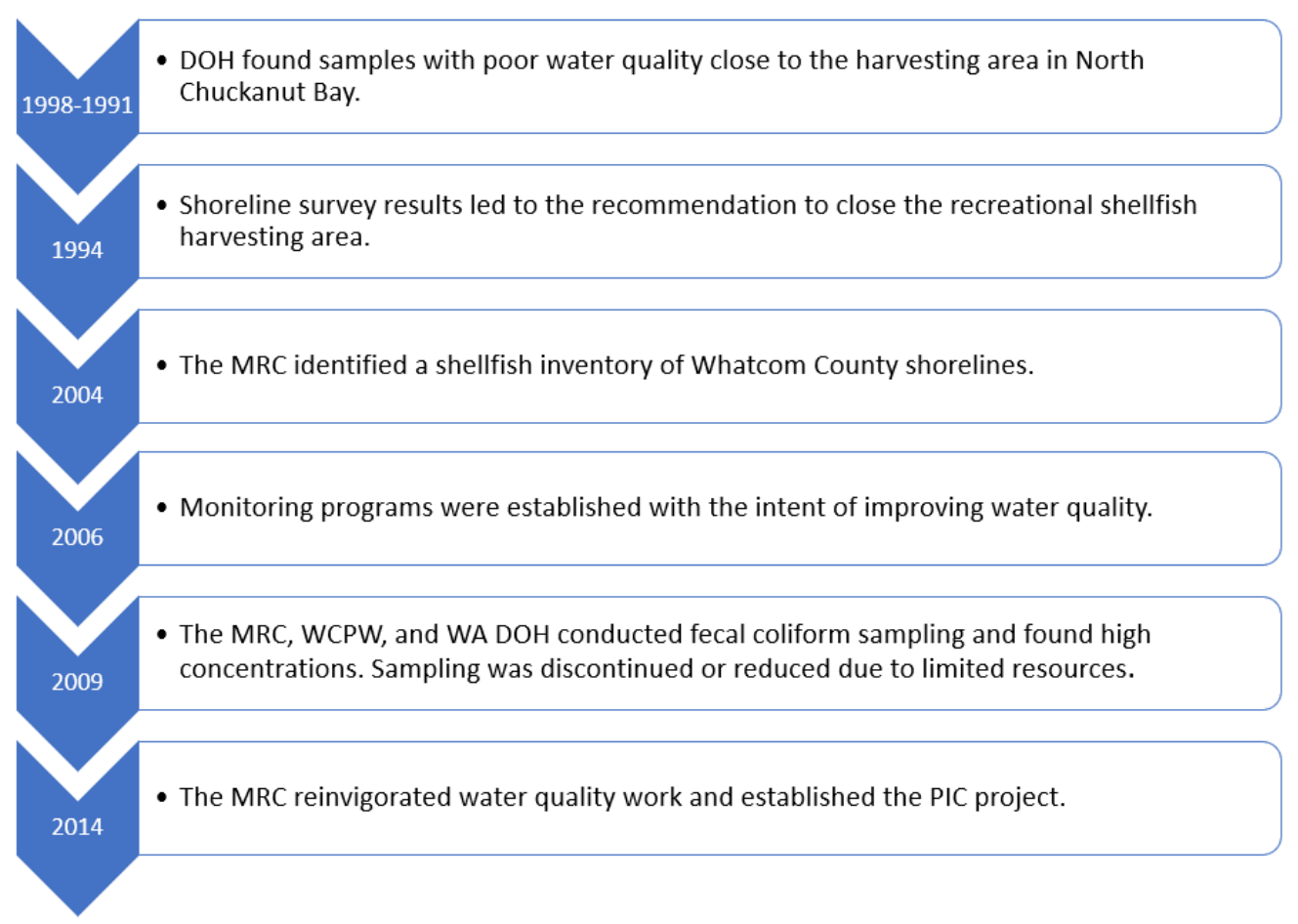

Figure 2: Timeline of efforts in North Chuckanut Bay.

Project Goals

The goal of this project was to provide WA DOH with sufficient data to demonstrate improvements in water quality to modify the recreational shellfish harvesting restrictions within North Chuckanut Bay. Another goal of the project was to continue outreach and education efforts within the Chuckanut Village community to encourage best practices and to support messaging around water quality protection.

Project Engagement

The MRC and staff with Whatcom County Public Works were responsible for all project planning and coordination including volunteer recruitment and training, sample collection, and data entry. To achieve the water quality sampling goals of this project, the MRC relied heavily on volunteers to conduct monthly sampling. A full list of volunteers and staff is included in Appendix A. Over the course of the sampling period, 4 volunteers participated, contributing 47 hours of volunteer time to the project.

Volunteers assist with collection of marine water quality samples in North Chuckanut Bay. Photo credits: Dana Flerchinger, MRC staff.

Partners

- **Whatcom County Public Works (WCPW):** Provided staff and support for PIC efforts in North Chuckanut Bay.
- **Washington State Department of Health (WA DOH):** Communicated about water quality conditions within North Chuckanut Bay.
- **Whatcom County Health and Community Services:** Assisted in sampling and outreach efforts.

Project Methods

Sampling occurred monthly at 7 freshwater sites and 7 marine sites from October 2024 through September 2025. Sample collection was conducted according to the grab sample collection protocols shown in Appendix B. Sample collection relied on two sampling teams: A freshwater team that collected samples from freshwater inputs to the bay, and a marine team that collected the marine samples from the bay plus the CB7 freshwater site that is only accessible via kayak. Field sheets for both the freshwater and marine environments are shown in Appendix C. Sites were identified through review of historical monitoring programs, drainage areas, and land use types. Data from the routine sampling provides an estimate of the geometric mean and the 90th percentile for fecal coliform (FC).

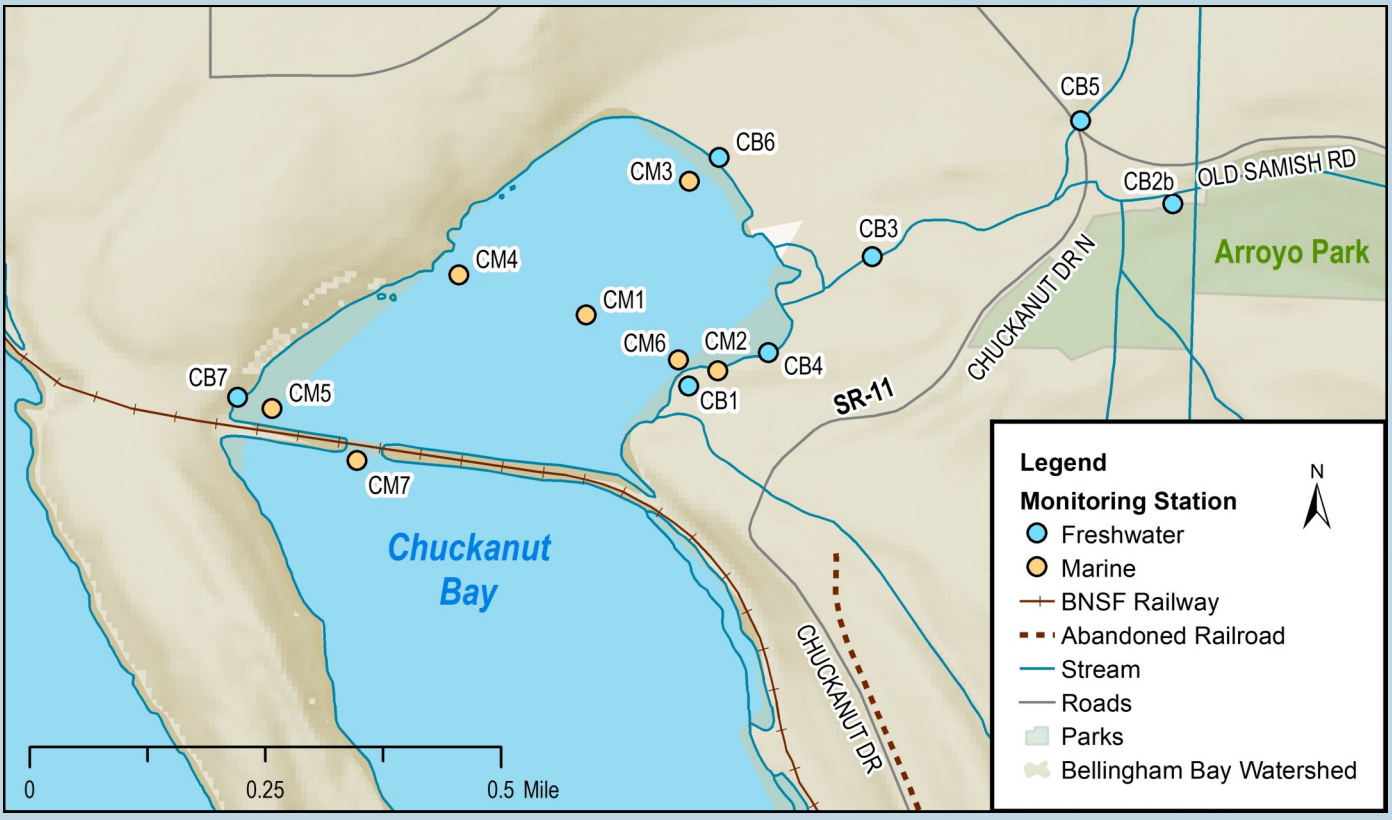

Figure 3: Map of North Chuckanut Bay freshwater (blue) and marine (yellow) sampling locations. CB7 was collected with the marine samples via kayak due to limited accessibility to this site from land.

Project Methods / Results

Monthly water quality data, including the raw data and water quality summaries, are included in Appendix D. For North Chuckanut Bay to be considered for reclassification, two water quality standards for shellfish must be met in both the marine and freshwater environments. The table below outlines the freshwater and marine standards set by the Washington Department of Ecology.

Marine Water Standards for Fecal Coliform (FC) Bacteria	Freshwater Standards for Fecal Coliform (FC) Bacteria
• Geometric Mean: 14 FC/100 mL • 90th Percentile: 43 FC/100 mL	• Geometric Mean: 100 FC/100 mL • No more than 10% of the samples exceed 200 FC/100 mL

Table 1: Department of Ecology Water Quality Standards for Whatcom County Watersheds.

To calculate the geometric mean and 90th percentile, WA DOH uses the last 30 samples that were collected. For the shellfish standard in the marine environment, a calculated 90th percentile is used, while in the freshwater environment, the percent of samples over a threshold is used. Graphs summarizing the water quality data from the last 30 samples/ 3 years are summarized on the following pages.

Left: Freshwater samplers collect a grab sample in Chuckanut Creek. **Right:** Signage indicating closures for recreational shellfish collection in North Chuckanut Bay. Photo credits: Dana Flerchinger, MRC staff.

Results: Freshwater

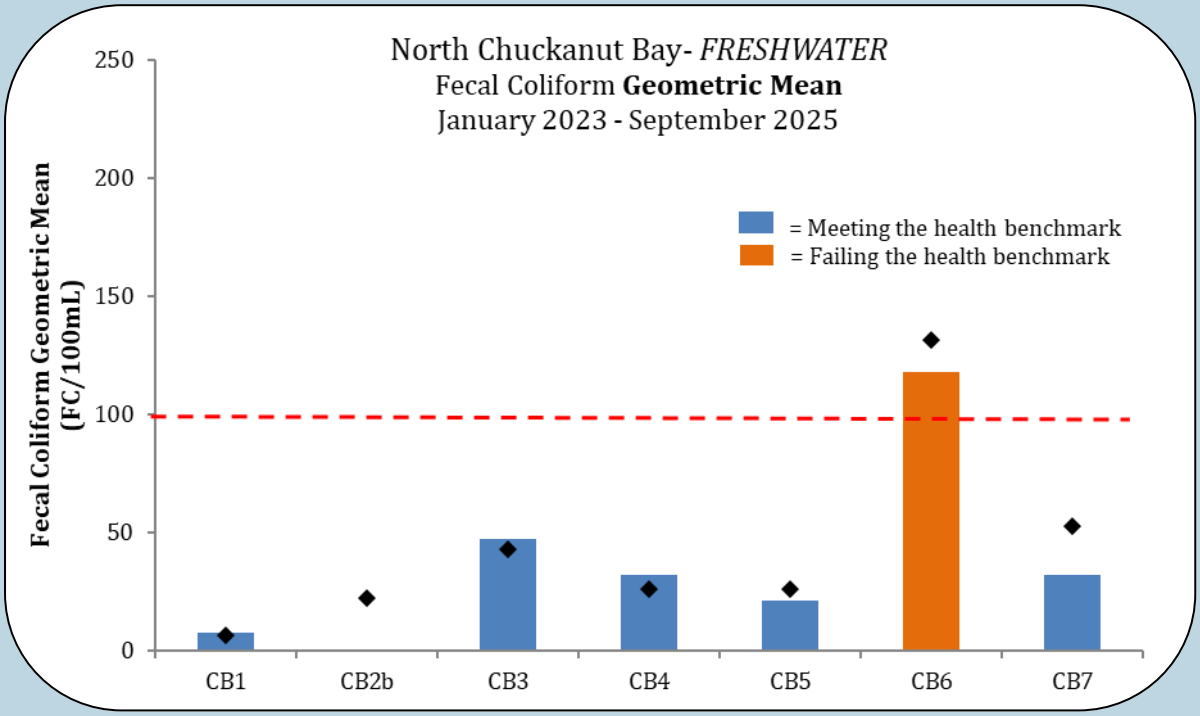

Figure 4: Bars show the 30 sample geometric mean for samples collected in the freshwater environment. The red dotted line indicates the freshwater geomean water quality standard for fecal coliform of 100 FC/100 mL. Sites with orange bars exceed the water quality standard. Black dots above the bars indicate that fecal bacteria levels have been increasing over the past year. There is no bar for CB2b as this site lacks 30 samples worth of data.

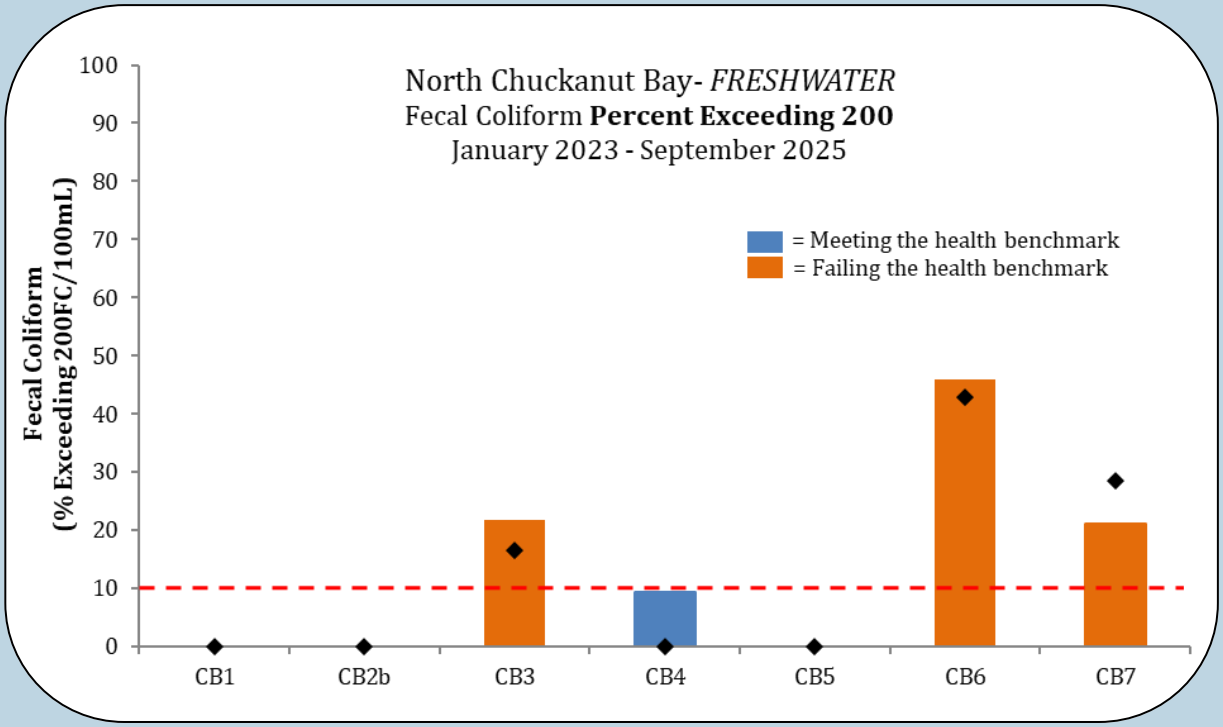

Figure 5: Bars show the 30 sample 90th percentile for samples collected in the freshwater environment. The red dotted line indicates the percentage of samples that exceed the freshwater fecal coliform standard of 200 FC/100 mL. Sites with orange bars exceed the water quality standard. There is no bar for CB2b as this site lacks 30 samples worth of data.

Results: Marine Water

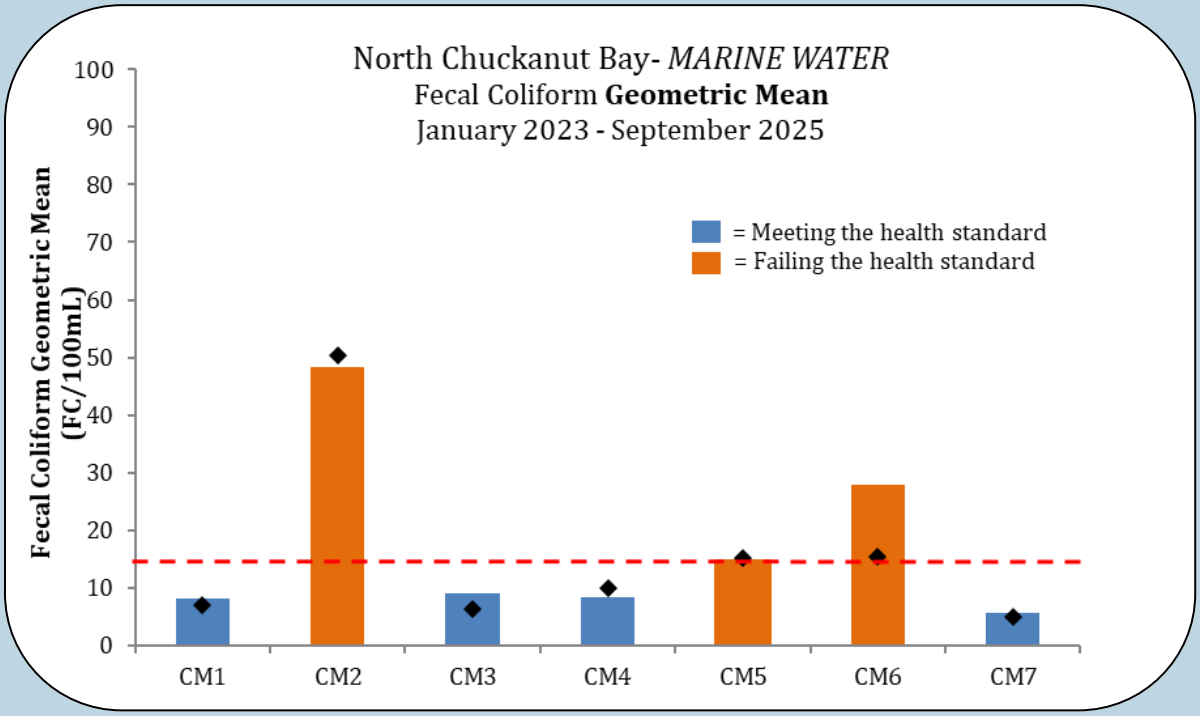

Figure 6: Bars show the 30 sample geometric mean for samples collected from the marine environment. The red dotted line indicates the marine water quality geomean standard for fecal coliform of 14 FC/100 mL. Sites with orange bars exceed the water quality standard. Black dots above the bars indicate that fecal bacteria levels have been increasing over the past year.

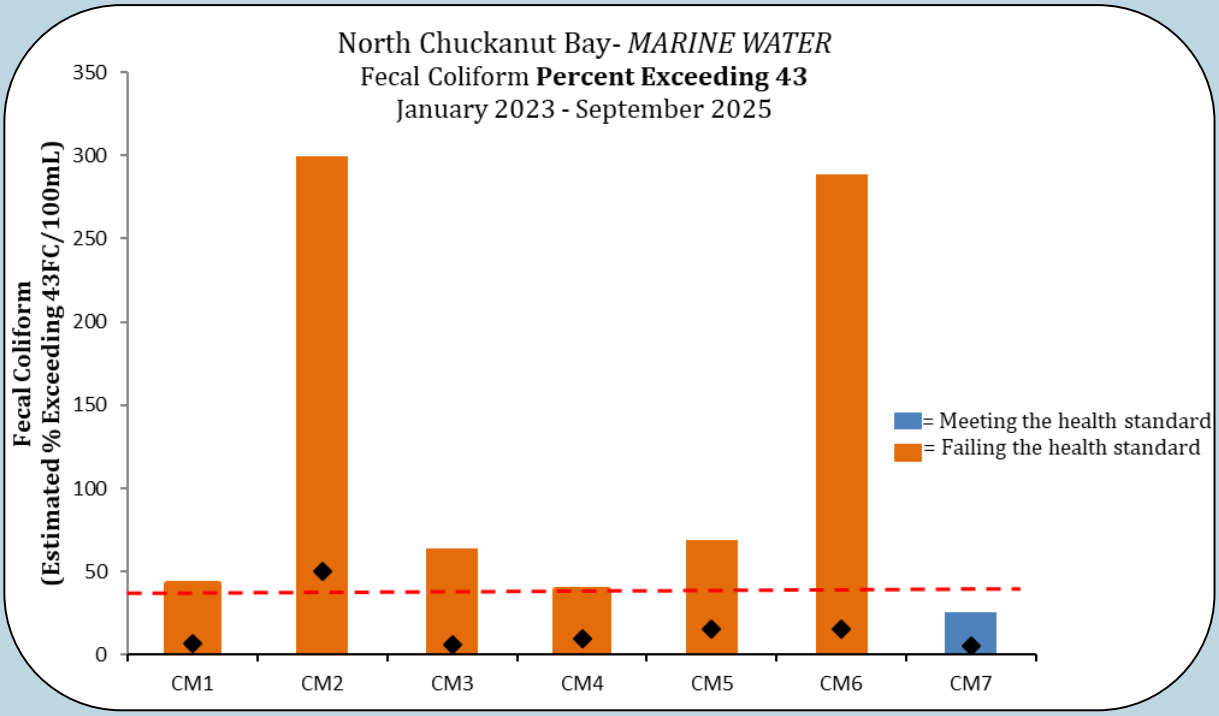

Figure 7: Bars show the 30 sample estimated 90th percentile for samples collected from the marine environment. The red dotted line indicates the marine water quality health standard of 43 FC/100 mL. Sites with orange bars exceed the water quality standard. Black dots above the bars indicate that fecal bacteria levels have been increasing over the past year.

Results

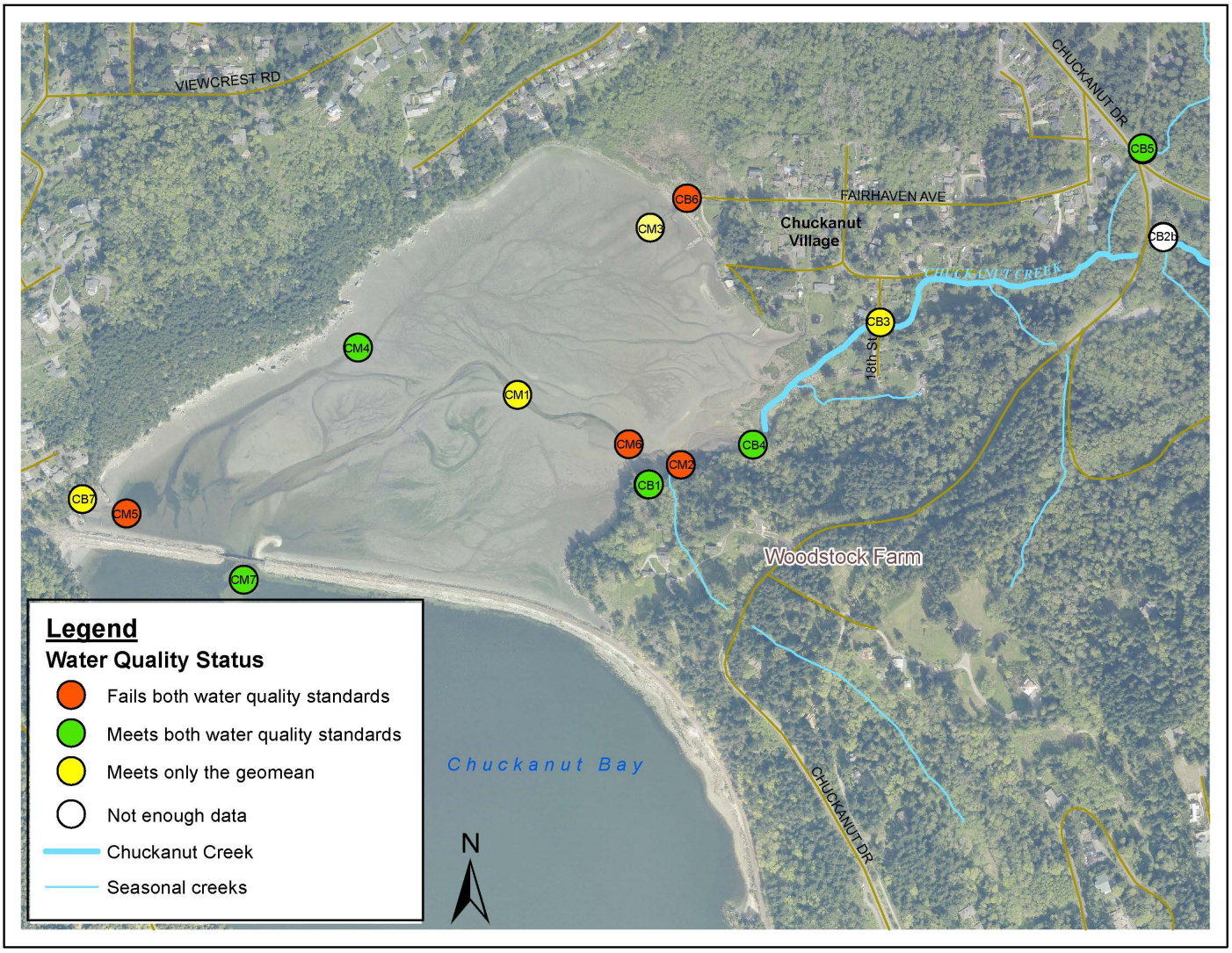

Figure 8: Map of North Chuckanut Bay showing the sampling locations that meet both water quality standards (green), meet only the geomean standard (yellow), and fail both standards (red). Sites CB1, CB4, CB5, CM4, and CM7 meet both water quality standards, CB3, CB7, CM3, and CM1 meet only the geomean, and CB6, CM2, CM5, and CM6 fail both standards. CB2b doesn't yet have 30 samples worth of data.

Results in Context

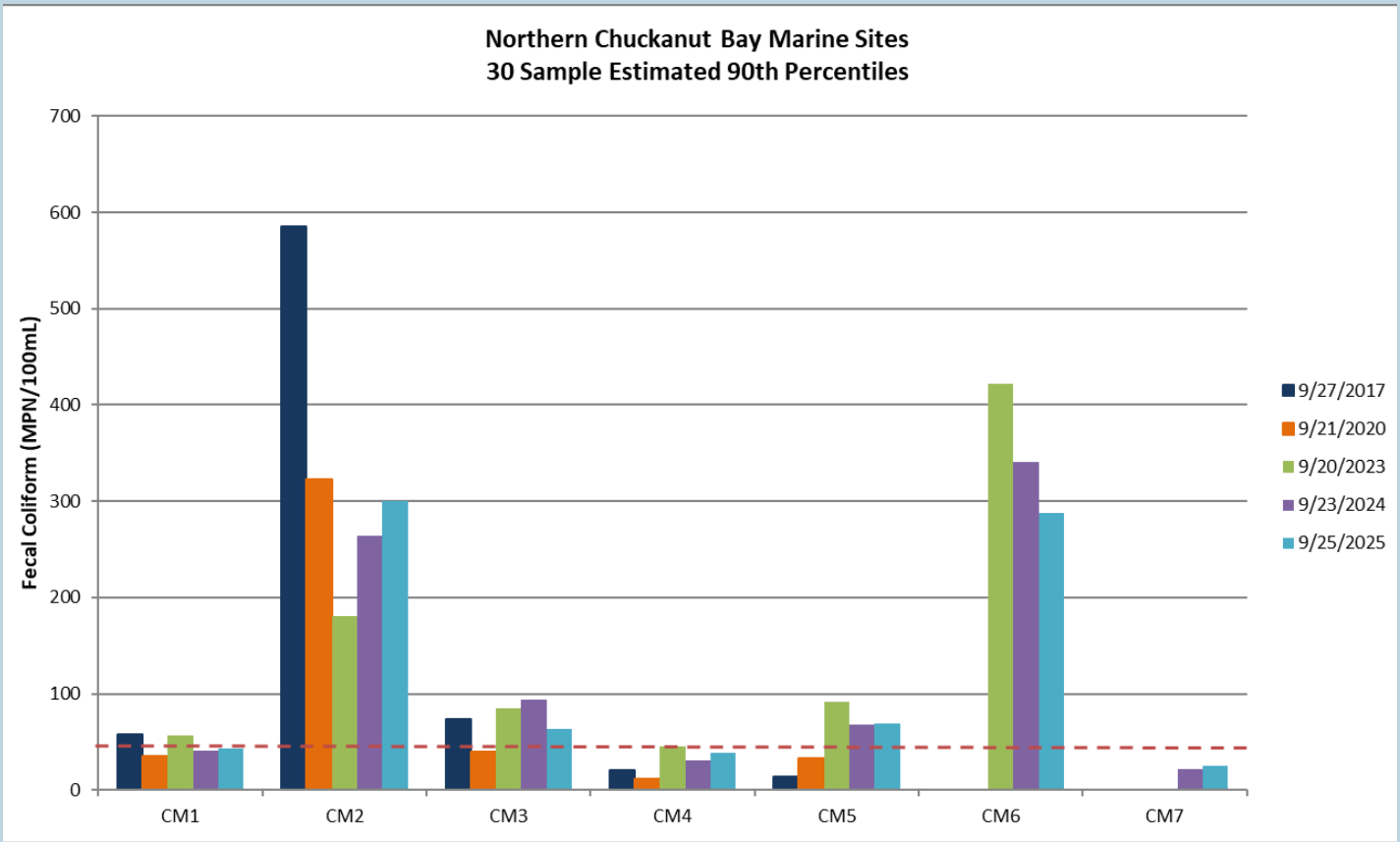

Figure 9: The rolling 30 sample 90th percentile for marine sites from September of 2017 through September of 2025. The red line represents the 90th percentile marine water quality standard at 43 FC/100mL. Historical data for CM6 and CM7 is limited as these locations weren't established until 2021. As of September of 2025, CM1 , CM4, and CM7 were below the 90th percentile marine water quality standard while CM2, CM3, CM5, and CM6 exceeded the standard. Declines in water quality were observed in 2025 as compared to 2024 at CM1, CM2, CM4, CM5, and CM7, while improvements were seen at CM3 and CM6. The spike in the 90th percentile at most sites from 2020 to 2023 is suspected to be attributable to a decrease in septic evaluations and reduced outreach efforts due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This trend was found at many of WCPW's other sampling locations as well.

Outcomes

Monthly water quality data was collected from October of 2024 through September of 2025. While the water quality has improved in some locations throughout North Chuckanut Bay, water quality still needs to show improvements throughout the entirety of the bay for this location to be considered for reclassification for recreational shellfish harvest. One goal that fell short during this reporting period was continuation of outreach and education efforts within North Chuckanut Bay. MRC staff engaged with members of the Chuckanut Village community while sampling, but no formal outreach events, mailers, or other forms of outreach and education were utilized during the reporting period.

Outputs

From October 2024-September of 2025:

- 12 water quality sampling events took place (one per month)
- 12 water quality summaries were generated (one per month)
- 4 volunteers and 3 WCPW staff participated in sampling
- 47 hours of volunteer time were contributed

Lessons Learned

The complex environment within North Chuckanut Bay has proved challenging for achieving improved water quality conditions to support the reopening of recreational shellfish harvest. One of the primary limiting factors within the bay is the railroad trestle that greatly restricts tidal circulation and flushing. Another challenge is the prevalence of septic systems within this watershed. Over the years, the MRC has worked with Whatcom County Health and Community Services and WCPW to provide outreach, education, and incentives for routine septic evaluations and maintenance, but despite making some progress, the COVID pandemic seemed to reverse the positive trends that were seen prior to 2020.

Next Steps

Because water quality has not improved at many sites throughout North Chuckanut Bay, the MRC has decided to discontinue water quality sampling after September of 2025, and will instead focus on a recovery plan and increased outreach efforts. WCPW Natural Resources staff will also be developing a technical report synthesizing the findings from over 10 years of water quality monitoring in the bay and outlining recommendations and next steps.

Over the past year, MRC staff also partnered with the WCPW PIC Program and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) on a microbial source tracking (MST) project to potentially help identify sources of fecal coliform at priority sites within North Chuckanut Bay. These priority sites included CM6, CB6, and CB3 which have seen consistently high concentrations of fecal coliform over the past 10 years. Sampling concluded in September of 2025, but results from the EPA aren't expected until early 2026. This data will be included in the technical report that WCPW staff will put together over the coming year, and may inform further recommendations within North Chuckanut Bay.

Appendices

- **Appendix A:** Volunteer List
- **Appendix B:** Sample Collection Protocols
- **Appendix C:** Blank Field Sheets
- **Appendix D:** Monthly Water Quality Summaries and Raw Data