Agencies monitor Pamlico

Goose Creek closes beach as precaution

By Mike Voss
News Editor

State health officials think it's premature to ban swimming in waters containing high levels of pfiesteria piscicida — a microorganism linked to fish kills along the Pamlico River during the weekend — but one state agency isn't taking a chance.

The beach at Goose Creek State Park was closed Monday, just as a precaution until more information about the fish kills can be obtained, said Phoebe Wahab, park spokesman.

The state's superintendent of parks ordered the closing, she said.

Pfiesteria was found at fish kills along the Pamlico River during the Fourth of July weekend.

Water samples taken in Bath Creek and Blounts Bay tested positive for pfiesteria levels high enough to kill fish. Once pfiesteria reaches 250 cells per milliliter, water can become lethal for fish.

The Bath Creek samples contained 450 to 600 cells per milliliter. The Blounts Bay samples contained 450 cells per milliliter. A concentration of 100 cells per milliliter can cause sores on fish.

The samples were taken and tests conducted by JoAnn Burkholder, a research scientist at N.C. State University and pfiesteria expert. Dr. Burkholder discovered pfiesteria in the Pamlico in 1990.

Those levels concern Kristin Rowles, executive director of the Pamlico-Tar River Foundation, a group trying to improve water quality by reducing the amount of pollutants entering the river.

"We need the state to clarify when and where it's safe to swim in the Pamlico River," Ms. Rowles said.

Ms. Rowles also said the state isn't doing a good job of informing people about the fish kills and possible threats to human health.

"That's clear because there are a lot of people using the river near these fish kills," Ms. Rowles said. "People needed to know about this before the Fourth of July weekend."

The presence of high levels of pfiesteria alone isn't enough for the state to ban swimming where the microorganism has been detected, said Bill Furney, director of public health communication for the N.C. Department of Environment, Health and Natural Resources.

"We have no evidence, so far, that would allow us to draw a connection between pfiesteria and human health consequences," Furney said.

It's fish kills, not the presence of pfiesteria, that trigger a

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response from state health officials. Furney said. Fish kills are caused by more than just high levels of pfiesteria, he said.

"The fish kills — that tells us something is going on. The trigger is the dead fish," Furney said.

In 1995, the department issued a set of precautions to follow in the event of any fish kill, not just those with ties to pfiesteria.

"When people say we're not doing anything, they're dead wrong," Furney said.

When there's a fish kill, people should follow those precautions, Furney said. He suggested that the media publicize the precautions as often as possible, and especially during fish kills.

Though more research on pfiesteria, particularly any potential threat to humans, is needed, there are some known characteristics about it, Furney said.

Just because water-sample tests show hundreds of pfiesteria cells, that doesn't mean all of them are potentially lethal, he said.

Pfiesteria has 22 different life stages, including those that exhibit both animal and plant characteristics, Furney said.

Not all of them are toxic. It's known that at least seven of them are toxic, he said.

Research should be continued, Furney said, about other things in the water — algae blooms, pollutants, other microorganisms (known and unknown) and speeding boats — that also pose a threat to humans.

Meanwhile, state environmental officials continue to monitor the fish kills.

"Really the only thing we can do is [illegible] is going on," said Robert [illegible], spokesman for the Department of Environment, Health and Natural Resources' Division of Water Quality regional office in Washington.

"We're going out, and we will continue to go out to collect [illegible]," Thorpe said.

Any information gleaned from those samples would be shared with Dr. Burkholder and anyone else interested in that data, Thorpe said.

DWQ's Washington office has received numerous calls from people concerned about the river's water quality, he said. Most of those people want to know if the water's safe for swimming.

"We don't make the calls on closing the waters," Thorpe said.

DWQ officials are telling people to use common sense when it comes to fish kills — avoid swimming in areas with dead or dying fish, or with live fish that have sores.

Ms. Rowles said PTRF also plans to take water samples and step up efforts at "getting to the cause of the problem."

Ms. Rowles thinks that increased pollution is causing the high levels of pfiesteria. Cleaning up the river by ridding it of pollutants, or at least reducing them, should help fight pfiesteria, she said.

"The pollutants...are a stimulant for pfiesteria," she said.

Fish-Kill Precautions

The N.C. Department of Environment, Health and Natural Resources' Division of Epidemiology recommends these health precautions during a fish kill:

— Do not consume any part of a fish with sores or other indication of disease.

— Do not collect for consumption dead or dying fish (floaters).

— Do not use fish harvested in a dead, dying or diseased state to feed domestic animals or use as bait.

— When there is uncertainty about the cause and side effects of a fish kill, maximum personal protection can be achieved by avoiding consumption of any fish, shellfish or crabs harvested in the immediate vicinity of a fish kill.

— Do not swim in waters proximate to a fish kill. This advice also applies to other recreational activities which would involve skin contact with the water of a fish kill site.

— Persons whose work requires water contact should postpone such work in the vicinity of an ongoing fish kill. If water contact cannot be postponed, protective gear should be used to reduce water contact.

-- Items that have been immersed in the waters of a fish kill should be handled with suitable protective gear (gloves).

— A person who falls into the water at a fish kill site or who has another unprotected water contact should change any wet clothing and wash the exposed area(s) with soap and clean water, or a solution of one part household bleach to 10 parts water. (Do not use undiluted bleach.)

— Pets should not be allowed to swim in the vicinity of a fish kill.

— People who experience illness that they believe may be related to exposures at a fish kill are advised to promptly contact a doctor.