

Toxic algae blooming in warm water from California to Alaska

By PHUONG LE
Associated Press

SEATTLE — A vast bloom of toxic algae off the West Coast is denser, more widespread and deeper than scientists feared even weeks ago, according to surveyors aboard a National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration research vessel.

This coastal ribbon of microscopic algae, up to 40 miles wide and 650 feet deep in places, is flourishing amid unusually warm Pacific Ocean temperatures. It now stretches from at least California to Alaska and has shut down lucrative fisheries. Shellfish managers on Tuesday doubled the area off Washington's coast that is closed to Dungeness crab fishing, after finding elevated levels of marine toxins in tested crab meat.

So-called "red tides" are cyclical and have happened many times before, but ocean researchers say this one is much larger and persisting much longer, with higher levels of neurotoxins bringing severe consequences for the Pacific seafood industry, coastal tourism and marine ecosystems.

Dan Ayres, coastal shellfish manager for the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, said the area now closed to crab fishing includes more than half the state's 157-mile-long coast, and likely will bring a premature end to this year's crab season.

First detected in May

"We think it's just sitting and lingering out there," said Anthony Odell, a University of Washington research analyst who is part of a

NOAA-led team surveying the harmful algae bloom, which was first detected in May. "It's farther offshore, but it's still there."

The survey data should provide a clearer picture of what is causing the bloom which is brownish in color, unlike the blue and green algae found in polluted freshwater lakes. Marine detectives already have a suspect: a large patch of water running as much as 3 degrees centigrade warmer than normal in the northeast Pacific Ocean, nicknamed "the blob."

"The question on every-

one's mind is whether this is related to global climate change. The simple answer is that it could be, but at this point it's hard to separate the variations in these cycles," said Donald Boesch, professor of marine science at the University of Maryland who is not involved in the survey. "Maybe the cycles are more extreme in the changing climate."

"There's no question that we're seeing more algal blooms more often, in more places, when they do occur, they're lasting longer and often over greater geographical areas. We're seeing more events than documented decades ago," said Pat Glibert, professor at Horn Point Laboratory, University of Maryland Center for Environmental Science.

Odell recently completed the first leg of the survey, mostly in California waters. On Wednesday, researchers plan to continue monitoring the sea between Newport and Seattle. The vessel will then go to Vancouver Island, wrapping up in early September. Another research ship is taking samples off Alaska.

Particularly thick off Santa Barbara

The brownish bloom was particularly thick off the coast of Santa Barbara, Calif., and Odell said it was unusually dominated by one type of algae called Pseudo-nitzschia, which can produce the neurotoxin domoic acid.

"It's an indication of an imbalance," said Vera Trainer, a research oceanographer with the Northwest Fisheries Science Center in Seattle. "Too much of any one thing is not healthy for anybody to eat."

Trainer said this bloom is the worst she's seen in 20 years of studying them. Harmful algal blooms have usually been limited to one area of the ocean or another, and have disappeared after a few weeks. This one has grown for months, waxing and waning but never going away.

"It's been incredibly thick, almost all the same organism. Looks like a layer of hay," said Raphael Kudela, a professor of ocean sciences at University of California, Santa Cruz.



Kathy Aney/East Oregonian

In this photo taken Sunday, Gary Morris, a racehorse owner and trainer from Bend, smiles at one of his thoroughbreds in Pendleton, at the NEIGH-bors horse hotel. The brakes and transmission on Morris' truck failed as he descended Cabbage Hill Saturday afternoon towing a horse trailer with three thoroughbreds.

Racehorses survive scary, sweaty ride through eastern Oregon

Tale involved Ex, Gypsy and a dark bay called Seattle Diner

By KATHY ANEY
East Oregonian

PENDLETON — After a harrowing ride down Cabbage Hill with failed brakes and three thoroughbreds, a Bend man won't soon forget his Pendleton adventure.

Gary Morris, a racehorse owner and trainer, was winding his way down the steep section of Interstate 84 Saturday afternoon in a three-quarter-ton truck hauling a horse trailer. Morris was transporting the trio of horses from a race in Boise, Idaho, and heading to another in Tillamook. As he neared a 45-mile-per-hour curve, he applied his brakes.

Nothing. "The brakes just left," Morris said. "I pumped them and nothing happened."

Morris dropped into second gear, but slowed little. He downshifted to first only to hear an ear-shattering squeal as the Ford's transmission gave out.

"I had no transmission and no brakes," he said.

Fortunately, his trailer brakes and emergency brake still functioned. Morris, 78, managed to keep the speed below 70 miles-per-hour as he made it safely to Pendleton exit 216 near the Arrowhead Travel Plaza. As soon as his adrenaline subsided, he turned his attention to his cargo. With the mercury hovering around 105 degrees, the valuable thoroughbreds were at risk. Morris, a financier turned racehorse owner, worried about the well-being of his horses.

"They were number one," he said.

About that time, Morris got the first of several doses of Pendleton hospitality.

"A guy and his wife stopped by in their pickup and pulled me to Kenworth," he said.

With disappointment, he learned the truck sales and repair business worked on only large commercial trucks. Service Manager Josh Payne, however, gave approval to move the horse trailer into the repair shop.

"The horses were drenched with sweat. The (Kenworth

people) pulled me into one of the bays and got the horses into the shade. They got three huge fans going," Morris said. "Without that, the horses might even have died right there."

"The horses were shaky and upset," Payne said.

A predicament

Kenworth employees provided water for Morris' three Boston terriers and showed the horse trainer to an air-conditioned lounge where he could use a computer to search for a rental truck with a gooseneck hitch. After making a string of fruitless calls, he dialed the number of the NEIGH-bors horse hotel, owned by Mary Alice Ridgway.

"I called Mary Alice and told her I was in a predicament," Morris said. "From there, everything was roses."

Ridgway and her friend Bev Kopperud arrived shortly, hooked Morris's trailer to Kopperud's Ford 350 and headed to Ridgway's horse hotel. When Morris unloaded his thoroughbreds, the two women gazed with admiration at equine perfection.

"I thought, 'Oh my God.' They were so beautiful," Kopperud said. "They were prancing and happy to be out of the trailer."

The group included two chestnuts named Ex and Gypsy and a dark bay called Seattle Diner. All have won their share of races, Morris said.

Ridgway installed Morris in a second-floor apartment over the stalls.

A truck for thoroughbreds

The next morning, colleagues from Morris' horse farm arrived with a truck to pull the thoroughbreds back to Bend. Morris said he won't soon forget the kindness he found in Round-Up City. His rescuers, however, deflected the praise.

"You do what's right," Payne said. "You treat people the way you'd want to be treated."

Kopperud and Ridgway agreed.

"It's not extraordinary to help people," Kopperud said. "It's what you do."

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