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Scientists investigate death of over one million sardines

by by Dan Bacher

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Biologists at the Department of Fish and Game office in Rancho expect to complete their testing of a dozen sardines by early next week, and DFG wardens will continue to monitor the harbor.

Photo of dead sardines in Redondo Beach harbor courtesy of All Voices.



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State fishery biologists are conducting tests on a dozen dead sardines from the Redondo Beach Harbor in southern California to determine the cause of a massive die-off on Tuesday,

March 8, according to Andrew Hughan, Department of Fish and Game (DFG) spokesman.

Approximately one million dead sardines were discovered in the Redondo Beach harbor Tuesday morning, raising concerns about possible water contamination among area residents, fishermen and environmentalists. The concern over increasing water pollution on the California coast highlights the alarming fact that the so-called "marine protected areas" slated to go into effect in southern California waters under Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger's Marine Life Protection Act (MLPA) Initiative will do nothing to protect the ocean from pollution.

The Marine Life Protection Act is a landmark law signed by Governor Gray Davis in 1999. Although the law was designed to provide broad and comprehensive protection of ocean waters by creating a network of marine protected areas along the California coast, the law was eviscerated in its implementation under the Schwarzenegger administration. The initiative fails to protect ocean waters from water pollution, oil drilling and spills, corporate aquaculture, wave energy projects and other human impacts on the ocean other than fishing and gathering.

Hughan claimed that samples tested on-site Tuesday were clear of contamination, but California Department of Fish and Game (DFG) wardens collected about a dozen dead fish to send via overnight mail to the DFG laboratory in Rancho Cordova, where biologists will run tests to confirm that the die-off was not due to toxins in the water, according to Hughan.

"Because all the dead fish were contained in one area of the harbor, officials believe that the most likely culprit was oxygen deprivation. Recent storms could have caused the school of sardines to swim around the breakwater and into the enclosed harbor, where they were trapped and unable to get out before depleting the water of oxygen," Hughan stated.

Biologists at the northern California laboratory expect to complete their testing by early next week, and DFG wardens will continue to monitor the harbor.

Fish kill highlights an ecosystem out of balance

Tribal leaders, environmental NGO representatives and others have developed theories on the larger factors behind the huge fish kill.

Caleen Sisk-Franco, Chief and Spiritual Leader of the Winnemem Wintu (McCloud River) Tribe, said the fish kill points to an ecosystem out of balance.

"These are serious signs that should not be reduced to 'poor fish,' but taken to heart because the signs are coming up the food chain," said Sisk-Franco, whose tribe is fighting against the construction peripheral canal and raising of Shasta Dam. "Now is the time to put all that you have to pray for balance in the waters!"

Sisk-Franco took issue with the DFG's contention, as discussed in an interview on <http://www.msnbc.msn.com>, that "Nothing appears to be out of sorts," they just swam to where there is no oxygen.

"Wow, science is failing to find any common connection between all these massive kills of birds, fish, and baby dolphins. But don't worry - it is all natural," she quipped.

Some are wondering whether the movement of fish into the harbor was spurred by a "perfect" storm of factors, including unregulated storm runoff on the southern California coast.

"It's too early to know exactly what happened, but one theory discussed in the LA Times piece is intriguing: that the fish kill may result from a 'perfect storm' of factors, one of which is runoff pollution," according to David Beckman on the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) Switchboard Blog (switchboard.nrdc.org/blogs/dbeckman/). "It has long been known that urban runoff is a major and in many places growing source of water pollution in the U.S."

"In Southern California, this is true," he continued. "As early as 1996, work by the Southern California Coastal Water Research Project (SCCWRP) identified runoff as exceeding all other point source of pollution but one (a treatment plant which has since been upgraded)."

Although this fish kills like this are not a common occurrence, biologists say that it can happen under certain conditions. Massive die offs of anchovies have occurred in Santa Cruz Harbor in Monterey Bay several times over the past few decades.

Hughan said the city of Redondo Beach activated its crisis response team Tuesday and by noon, more than 50 volunteers were scooping fish with nets, according to Hughan. The dead fish were transported to a collection center, where they will be recycled into fertilizer. The harbor remained open throughout the day and continues to remain open.

"What we're trying to tease apart is whether it's a consequence of algal buildup, a fish buildup or something toxic in the water," USC biological sciences professor David Caron told the LA Times on March 9. (<http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/chatter/2011/03/redondo-beach-fish-kill.htm>)

MLPA Initiative fails to protect ocean from pollution

It will be interesting to see what the results of the biologists' tests yield. Regardless of the immediate cause behind the sardine die-off, the fish kill has served a good role in raising questions about the increasing contamination of southern California's coastal waters by storm water runoff and other pollution.

The MLPA Initiative, funded privately by the shadowy Resources Legacy Fund Foundation, has gone out of its way to create fake marine protected areas that do nothing to protect the ocean from the water pollution that plagues southern California waters, particularly after major storms.

A courageous group of fisherman and conservationists exposed Arnold Schwarzenegger, falsely portrayed as the "Green Governor" by the corporate media and corporate environmental groups throughout his two terms, for doing nothing to stop pollution and other activities other than fishing in a protest they held at the Global Climate Summit in Los Angeles on September 30, 2009.

"The Marine Life Protection Act currently being implemented in Southern California by the administration was supposed to be comprehensive, addressing all aspects that affect the ocean, like pollution, coastal development and fishing," said protest organizer Wendy Tochiara. "However, the Governor has abandoned sound science and is instead only duplicating existing fishing ban laws." (<http://www.californiaprogressreport.com/site/node/7901>)

John Stephens-Lewallen, North Coast environmental leader, and other opponents of the MLPA fiasco slammed Schwarzenegger for appointing Catherine Reheis-Boyd, the president of the Western States Petroleum Association, as the chair of the MLPA Initiative

Blue Ribbon Task Force for the South Coast. Reheis-Boyd, a vocal supporter of new oil drilling off the California coast and less regulations for the oil industry, also served on the North Central Coast and North Coast task forces

Other corporate interests who presided over the MLPA Blue Ribbon Task Force that created the fake marine protected areas include members William (Bill) Anderson and Gregory F. Schem.

Anderson has been president and chief operating officer of Westrec Marinas since 1989. Westrec Marinas is the nation's largest owner and operator of waterfront marinas.

Schem is president and chief executive officer of Harbor Real Estate Group, specializing in marina and waterfront real estate investments, including a marina, fuel dock, and boat yard in Marina del Rey, in addition to other California assets.

How can anybody possibly claim that the MLPA Initiative "protects" the oceans when oil company, real estate and marina development interests – all of whom all have a direct stake in how marine reserves are implemented and designated – oversaw the creation of reserves that fail to comprehensively protect the ocean?

Hopefully, Governor Jerry Brown and Natural Resources Secretary John Laird will show some courage, break with Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger's abysmal environmental legacy and cancel or suspend the corrupt MLPA Initiative. They should instead work to implement real, comprehensive ocean protection policies along the California coast that combat water pollution, oil drilling and spills, corporate aquaculture, military testing, wave energy projects and water diversions.