

Mass fish kill in Hawaii linked to molasses

September 16 2013, by Matt Pearce

Fish began dying off en masse in the waters around Honolulu after hundreds of thousands of gallons of molasses spilled into Honolulu Harbor early this week - and there's nothing officials can do to clean it up.

Thousands of fish have died from the sugary sludge. Crabs lay dead along the floor while more fish floated listlessly in the harbor, with some seeming to gasp above the surface of the water, so contaminated by the thick, syrupy sweetener.

The spill is one of the worst man-made disasters to hit Hawaii in recent memory, officials said, not least because no one has quite seen anything like it.

"There's nothing you can do to clean up molasses," said Jeff Hull, a spokesman for Matson Inc., the company responsible for the leak. "It's sunk to the bottom of the harbor. Unlike oil, which can be cleaned from the surface, molasses sinks."

Put another way by Janice Okubo, a spokeswoman for the Hawaii Department of Health: "It's sugar in the water. If you know a scientific way to remove it from water, let us know."

Once at the bottom, [wildlife officials](#) said, the sludge replaces the oxygen-bearing [seawater](#) that bottom-dwelling fish use to breathe.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency on Friday said it will

dispatch two coordinators to assist in the response, according to Sen. Brian Schatz, D-Hawaii. The EPA, he said, could recommend a technique known as "air curtains" to protect particularly sensitive affected areas, a technique that uses long tubes to oxygenate the water and help disperse and break down contaminants.

"This is a serious situation, and it requires a coordinated, aggressive response at all levels of government," Schatz said in a statement.

Officials have urged residents to stay out of the water, worried that sharks and eels were coming to feed on the [dead fish](#), which officials were trying to clear away to discourage predators. "The public is advised not to enter the ocean if they notice a brown color in the water," the Department of Health said in a statement. "The nutrient-rich liquid could also cause unusual growth in marine algae, stimulate an increase in harmful bacteria and trigger other environmental impacts."

The crisis was first reported early Monday when a Matson Inc. ship was being loaded via pipeline with 1,600 tons of molasses for shipping to the West Coast. A brown haze was reported in the water shortly after the loading began. Matson dispatched divers into the harbor, and the leak was finally detected Tuesday morning near one of the piers and was patched.

As much as 1,400 tons of molasses may have fouled the water, though, health officials said. Matson, in a statement, said it "regrets that the incident impacted many harbor users, as well as wildlife. ... We are taking steps to ensure this situation does not happen again." The company has been shipping molasses from Honolulu for about 30 years.

Shipping officials weren't the only ones caught off guard. "It came as a shock to all of us," said Robert Harris, director of Sierra Club of Hawaii. "I don't think any of us were aware molasses even existed in Hawaii."

Harris said the Sierra Club planned to push officials to strongly enforce existing environmental regulations, but cautioned, "I'm not sure there's anything to do. They do have officials out there removing the dead fish to keep potential sharks from gathering, but I think the damage was too quick - once it was reported, it was too late."

Health officials said they expect the molasses plume to go from Honolulu Harbor into the nearby Ke'ehi Lagoon and then dissipate in the ocean. But there was no timetable for when that may happen, and David B. Field, an assistant professor of marine sciences at Hawaii Pacific University, said there was no predicting the possible consequences: What kind of bacteria will come to consume the sugar? How low will oxygen levels go? Will the [water](#) become more acidic?

"We've never had a molasses spill," Field said, "so I guess you could consider this an enormous experiment - of the most unfortunate kind."

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