

Contamination under boats no worse than elsewhere in California bay, study says

March 13 2009, By Thomas Peele

A yearlong federal study has determined levels of contaminated sediment found under obsolete, rotting government ships anchored in Suisun Bay, in central California, are no higher than those found elsewhere in local waters, according to documents released Thursday.

The [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration](#) found levels of zinc, [barium](#), copper and other metals under the [ships](#) were about the same as other locations in the Bay, and did not call for an immediate cleanup of the Bay bottom. Paint falling from the ships remains an environmental hazard.

"Finding paint chips in sediments is consistent with observations that paint continues to exfoliate from the vessels; this remains a matter of concern as an ongoing source of contamination to the bay," the report states.

The lead NOAA official on the project said the study's results don't mean there aren't significant environmental issues with the fleet.

"NOAA's not saying there aren't problems," said Rob Ricker, regional manager for the agency's Office of Response and Restoration. Rather, he said, the report concludes there aren't increased levels of metals under the fleet.

A U.S. [Maritime Administration](#) study in 2007 in response to Contra Costa Times reports about the decaying fleet found more than 21 tons of

lead, zinc, barium, copper and other [toxic metals](#) had fallen into the Bay in paint peeling from the ships.

"The contaminant concentrations observed are largely comparable to values for the same metals and organics measured in other regions of the greater San Francisco Bay," the report states.

The chief state water regulator for the region said numerous issues remain in [Suisun Bay](#).

The report concerns "only a small part of addressing the pollution caused by the fleet," said Bruce Wolfe, executive officer of the Bay Area Regional [Water Quality](#) Control Board.

Questions remain about where the paint that falls from the ships goes, he said.

"Where did the nearly 20 tons of metals and other pollutants MarAd reported in 2007 go and what impact has that had?" Wolfe said. "The companion to (the NOAA report) is where are the pollutants that are continuing to discharge going and what is their impact?"

The Maritime Administration didn't make anyone available for an interview yesterday. An e-mail sent by a spokeswoman quoted a senior official as saying the report needed to be studied before a response could be issued.

Myriad other issues remain concerning the 70 ships stored off Benicia, Calif., near the Carquinez Straits. California and the U.S. Maritime Administration remain essentially "stalemated" over environmental issues related to the fleet, Wolfe said.

Among the issues:

- Despite the Maritime Administration announcing a contract last year, no work has started on removing exfoliating paint from the ships.

Wolfe said the state has not yet issued a pollution permit for the work.

- There is still no long-term solution on how to safely clean the ships below the waterline _ a requirement before they can be towed to Texas scrapping yards.
- Efforts to use dry docks at Mare Island in Vallejo to scrap some of the ships are "limping along," Wolfe said, but dredging in the area is still needed and not all the ships in the Suisun fleet can be broken up there because of their size.
- The state and environmental groups are proceeding with a lawsuit against the Maritime Administration in Sacramento federal court, attempting to force a faster cleanup. Wolfe said there have been overtures that the Obama administration will resolve the matter more quickly and in a more environmentally responsible way than its predecessor, but that any resolution likely remains months away.

Wolfe said he believes there will be "a significant change in response" from the Maritime Administration when the change in leadership from the Bush to Obama administrations is complete.

The most vexing issue, Wolfe said, remains how to clean the underwater portion of the ships. That work must be done to meet Coast Guard regulations about the spread of invasive species before the vessels can be moved.

Some of the ships have been anchored in Suisun Bay for decades and their hulls are crusted with marine growth. But when that growth is removed, metals have come off with it, causing pollution.

The best way to clean the ships is in dry dock, but many of the vessels are so old and brittle there are fears they might not survive the process and remain seaworthy.

Wolfe said all Maritime Administration tests on underwater hull cleaning "didn't meet our standards" and the two sides remain stalemated on the matter.

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