Texas Gulf Coast is virtually seaweed-free

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A slight shift in ocean currents has spared the Texas Gulf Coast from a seaweed onslaught that left its beaches reeking last summer.

The change saved the Texas coast from a repeat of the waves of sargassum that washed ashore in 2014, said Tom Linton, assistant professor of marine resource management at the Texas A&M University at Galveston.

Last year's outbreak was the worst in at least 50 years to hit Galveston, according to university researchers.

"Normally, the loop current that passes through the Caribbean Sea and Gulf of Mexico is seasonally static. But this year, the loop current has adjusted somewhat more in an easterly direction, and this adjustment has created a sort of filtration system into the Gulf, meaning the sargassum has not been headed our way," Linton said in a press release.

Instead, those weedy waves have washed onto beaches throughout the Caribbean basin, from the Dominican Republic in the north to Barbados in the east and Mexico's Caribbean resorts in the west. There stinking mounds of seaweed that in some cases have piled up nearly 10 feet high on beaches are choking scenic coves and cutting off moored boats.

Sargassum is a floating brownish algae that generally blooms in the Sargasso Sea, a roughly 2 million square mile body of warm water in the North Atlantic that is a major habitat and nursery for numerous marine species.

Clumps of the seaweed have long washed up on Caribbean coastlines, but researchers say the algae blooms have exploded in extent and frequency in recent years.

As for the smelly mounds and piles on the beaches, Linton and seaweed researcher Robert Webster have developed methods for compacting the seaweed into bales and, when combined with sand, using it to prevent beach erosion. The researchers are also investigating if it can be adapted for livestock feed.