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EPD investigating cause of local fish kill

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Brandi Lane and her son, Gunner, sit by a pool where they normally fish. They discovered the pool full of dead fish last week.

Michael Hall/The Brunswick News

Brandi Renee Lane's stomach turned last Thursday when she and her son Gunner approached the canal in Sterling they frequent for a quiet afternoon in the shade and a little fishing.

Instead of the normally serene setting of softly flowing freshwater, they found a canal filled with what more closely resembled chocolate milk that contained floating, dead fish. Workers were nearby who she said appeared to be connected somehow to the situation, but they wouldn't talk to her about their activities, she said.

Lane learned later, after a call to the Georgia Environmental Protection Division and local environmental groups, that chemicals, specifically copper carbonate, had been released into the canal by a nearby industrial operation.

“He loves to fish,” Lane said of Gunner, 2 1/2, who sat on her knee looking down at their fishing hole, a deep spot in the canal formed by the water flowing out of a culvert that runs under train tracks. “This is our happy place. We love to come out here and fish, watch the trains, and just enjoy being outside. This is heartbreaking.”

Her call to local environmental groups prompted the response of three organizations who are working together to monitor cleanup activities and ensure the canal is restored as best as possible to its previous state.

“It still looks like a chocolate milk pool,” said Maggie VanCantfort, Watershed Specialist Confluence to Coast for Altamaha Riverkeeper.

She worked on Tuesday alongside a dammed portion of the canal that runs for a stretch along Chris Drive in Sterling with Satilla Riverkeeper Chris Bertrand, Trish DuBose, Satilla Riverkeeper’s water quality coordinator, and Rachael Thompson, executive director for Glynn Environmental Coalition, to collect samples of each species of fish they could find, one dead rooster in the canal, and to sample water.

Copper carbonate is particularly harmful to fish and invertebrates, DuBose said. Lane said she counted 140 dead fish in a short stretch of the canal. VanCantfort, Bertrand, DuBose, and Thompson believe there are many more than that.

Beyond the immediate concerns held by the environmentalists of the fish kill and contaminated water, many nearby residents, like Lane, use a well for their potable water. Some of the residents have property adjacent to the canal, increasing the risk for contaminated water intrusion, they say.

The dammed portion, about 200 yards worth, was created to contain the chemicals by an environmental cleanup crew from HEPACO in Jacksonville. Pumps were used to move cleaner water from upstream of the contaminated area and move it through pump lines to below the dammed area.

Other pumps were being used to drain chemical laden water out of the area that has been dammed. Soil testing is set to commence once area is drained, workers on scene said.

The EPD did not identify in an email on Tuesday a specific industrial operation from where the chemicals came, but did say they believe a water pipe broke, pouring water over wood preserving chemicals, carrying them into the canal.

“The spill is currently being investigated with a fish kill report and lab sample results forthcoming,” said Sara Lips, director of communications and community engagement for the Georgia EPD. “Contractors have been at the site since 12/27 working on remediation and EPD Emergency Response has also been on site in that time.”

Lips confirmed the chemical release of low concentration – less than 1% solution – of copper carbonate that was reported to the division prior to the environmental response.

The investigation is ongoing, Lips said, and the EPD will consider whether punitive action is warranted when it is complete.

The Riverkeeper organizations and Glynn Environmental Coalition believe after discussions with the Georgia Environmental Protection Division that the chemical release was the result of a pipe that burst at nearby Sunbelt Forest Products during the frigid holiday cold snap.

Sunbelt Forest Products did not return phone messages left by The News on Tuesday.

Michael Hall