

## Daily Breeze

### Ocean toxin still takes toll as levels decline

Equipment monitoring the algae bloom along the coast finds the greatest level just outside the port.

By Donna Littlejohn  
Staff Writer

A greater than usual number of sick and dying animals and birds along the local coastline has been attributed to some of the highest levels of a naturally occurring neurotoxin that have ever been tracked.

"This year is through the roof in terms of the amounts of toxins" found at local offshore testing stations, said USC biology professor David Caron.

But the deadly condition appears to have peaked for the year -- on April 26 -- and samples taken over the past two weeks show cell concentrations are dropping, Caron said.

It's unknown, however, whether the cells are merely migrating to deeper ocean levels.

Still "we're hoping we're over the hump," Caron said.

The poison, domoic acid, is a byproduct of blooms of toxic algae that form off the coast.

The highest levels were found at two stations just outside San Pedro's breakwater in the Port of Los Angeles, where scientists recorded more than 1 million cells per liter -- "an exceptionally high level," Caron said.

The result has been more sick or dying animals and birds, which have overwhelmed local wildlife rehabilitation centers, including the Marine Mammal Care and International Bird Rescue Research centers in San Pedro.

Caron is conducting a multiyear study of the sea algae blooms within a 154-square-mile patch of ocean from the Palos Verdes Peninsula to Newport Beach. While the algae is a natural occurrence each year, Caron said much remains unknown about what causes the ocean to fill up with one type of plankton or another in the huge blooms, commonly called red tide.

This year's outbreak has taken a toll on the usual animals, including sea lions, but also is affecting dolphins, possibly whales and birds. Many don't survive.

"This is not an unusual mortality event," said veterinarian Lauren Palmer from the Marine Mammal Care Center. "It's sadly becoming a usual mortality event."

Of the 160 sea lions taken in this year at the center in Angels Gate Park, 70 were determined to be suffering from domoic acid poisoning, she said.

"It's been a tough month for marine mammals," said Peter Wallerstein, president of Whale Rescue Team. As of Wednesday, Wallerstein said, eight sea lions have been stranded on beaches along the Los Angeles coastline.

Several California brown pelicans suffering the effects of domoic acid exposure were rehabilitated and set free Wednesday on San Pedro's Cabrillo Beach.

The poison does its damage by entering the ocean food chain, affecting wildlife such as sea lions, dolphins and pelicans that consume fish that have eaten the plankton. Animals suffering from domoic acid poisoning often crawl up on shore and bob their heads, appearing disoriented. The toxins affect nervous systems and could leave permanent brain damage.

Due to overcrowded conditions, there is a 48-hour wait before sea lions and seals can be picked up to be treated. Birds get quicker treatment.

Wallerstein warned people to stay clear of stranded animals. Not only can they bite, but trying to feed them or push them back into the water could hurt their chances of getting help later.

"We're urging the public to stay away, to keep your distance," Wallerstein said. "Call a lifeguard or a rescue center. If an animal is chased or pushed back into the water, we might lose our chance to save them."

How to Help:

If a stranded animal is found on the beach, call 866-WILD-911 or 800-39-WHALE.