



Redondo Fish Kill Prompts Boaters to Take Action

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By Kate McLaughlin

Recent problems in Redondo Beach have brought members of the Redondo Beach Boaters Association (RBBA) together with the city and local marinas.

Midsummer red tides asphyxiated tens of thousands of fish in Redondo Beach, and their corpses collected in the Port Royal and Portofino Marina areas.

For weeks, the dead fish sat rotting and macerating in the small harbor area, hemming in boats and docks, coating rocks and the shoreline and fouling the air with an unforgettable stench.

"The massive fish kill in June was bad. Really bad," said Don Mueller, a RBBA member who keeps his boat at the Port Royal Marina in Redondo Beach. "I can take just about anything, but even I couldn't take this. On a scale of 0 to 100, it was pushing a 96 on the smell-o-meter. A normal day around here is usually only a 15. And the surface of the water was covered with a thick scum from all the decomposing fish."

More than a week after the fish kill, some of the decomposing fish were removed. The smelly mess eventually dissipated on its own.

In the meantime, boaters suffered. Even crabs fled the water en masse, vacating the water and littering sidewalks and retaining walls.

"You could smell the harbor from six blocks back," RBBA president Kevin Herick said. "It was unbearable."

Mueller, Herick and other RBBA members figured there had to be a solution.

Rather than sit back and leave cleanup efforts solely to government officials, these boaters decided to take matters into their own hands.

"After that first fish kill, we decided to come up with a method of collection and disposal, with tools and volunteers and whatever it took," Mueller said. "We figured we had a year to get a plan of action together."

Mueller contacted the city and attended a water-quality task force meeting. His goal was to assist officials in an advisory role, so that all concerned could be poised for a quick and efficient cleanup during next season's expected red tide fish kill. He hoped to shorten the cleanup process from a matter of weeks to a matter of days.

As it turned out, Mueller didn't have to wait until next season to put a plan in action.

"(RBBA member) 'Halibut' Larry Brown called me up about a week after the first water-quality task force meeting," Mueller said. "He told me the fish were starting to pop. Millions of fish were coming to the surface and gasping for air. We knew it meant they were getting ready to die from another red tide. We had to move right then to get the jump on them."



Red Tide - Thousands of fishes died in recent red tides. It took volunteers a week to clean up.

Photo by: Dan Mueller photo

Mueller's plan, which had barely begun to take shape, was put to the test.

He immediately sent an e-mail to RBBA members and rallied a small army of volunteers to scoop out the fish.

He contacted Redondo Beach City Councilman Chris Cagle, who coordinated the removal side of the massive cleanup effort, making sure dumpsters were in place.

Local marinas offered cleaning materials and loaned members of their staff to help clean up the area. The scoop nets were provided by the RBBA and the Body Glove company.

Over the course of seven days, dozens of volunteers rotated in and out, scooping thousands upon thousands of dead fish out of the water in two shifts.

Together, they hauled out almost 400 five-gallon buckets of dead fish. At 33 pounds per bucket, that's more than 6 tons of dead fish flesh that was removed by volunteer boaters.

"This is a really good example of what boaters can do if they get their act together and take action," Herick said. "It's also a good example of a successful cooperative effort with everyone involved - the city, the marinas, the yacht clubs. We all worked together to solve the problem."

Herick, Mueller and other volunteers will continue to monitor the water in their area and do what they can to help keep it clean in the event of another fish-killing red tide.

They're also presenting a slide show of the cleanup effort at the next RBBA meeting, October 27 from 7 to 9 p.m. at the Portofino Conference Room. Complimentary coffee and cookies will be served and awards will be presented to volunteers who pitched in to clean up the harbor.