

Task force to investigate pier and harbor pollution

by Nikki Routh

Redondo's beaches are not making the grade and city officials have decided to do something about it.

Water quality issues that have plagued the harbor and pier areas for the last several years have reached a crisis point. The Municipal Pier has consistently received grades of "F" in water quality for high levels of bacteria from Heal the Bay's monthly beach reports. And the fish die-off resulting from June's "red tide" algae bloom pointed to the city's lack of preparedness for environmental calamities. Thousands of fish rotted in harbor waters and a fetid smell clung to the waterfront for several weeks.



Signs warn swimmers of water pollution south of the Redondo Pier.

In response, Mayor Mike Gin and the Redondo Beach City Council are forming a water quality task force to clean up the harbor.

"[The task force] will be like a harbor emergency response team," said Mayor Gin.

The team will consist of 15 volunteers with the job of pinpointing Redondo's pollutants. Gin will appoint members from the Redondo Beach Boaters' Association and the Harbor Commission as well as other local residents and students for a one-year intensive "examination of overall water quality issues."

Redondo's harbor has faced a multitude of contamination problems in the past few months. According to Councilman Chris Cagle, residents have complained of trash accumulating in the marina, garbage trucks compacting trash and allowing the liquid to run in to the ocean, and a suspicious white, grease-like substance floating on the water's surface. Cagle said complaints have suggested illegally refuse dumping may be occurring.

"We want able to get volunteers together to concentrate on the harbor and pier area and find out what things contribute to pollution, give them a year to analyze it, and [make recommendations to] take care of the immediate, obvious issues," Cagle said.

Heal the Bay, a non-profit environmental organization, named the Municipal Pier and the 100 yards of beach due south of the pier one of this summer's top ten "Beach Bumpers," a category given to beaches most egregiously below water quality standards.

"What it says, if you're making the top ten in the state, is that you're either exceeding the level of bacteria frequently or the amount you're exceeding it by is great," said James Alamillo, a biologist with Heal the Bay. "In the case of Redondo, we were getting a heavy mixture of bacteria every week."

The Health Department has posted signs along Redondo's 100-yard contaminated coast, warning swimmers against entering the water in the area. Such high levels of bacteria can result in upper respiratory infections, full body rashes, and cold or flu-like symptoms.

"The way I look at it, it's like the stock market. Would you invest in a company that continually fails to meet its mark?" Alamillo said. "A lot of people wouldn't, but some people are risk takers."

The artist Wyland, who coincidentally came to Redondo Beach last Saturday on his "Ocean Challenge"

environmental education tour, told the mayor he and his foundation would be willing to invest in the effort to clean up Redondo waters. Wyland told Gin that his foundation would also commit to helping with the environmental education of the community. Cagle noted that such environmental outreach efforts would likely be eligible for federal and state grant funding.

Gin said this past June was particularly bad for harbor water quality. Boaters complained of more floating debris than in years past, and the severity of this year's red tide caused the death of thousands of fish.

Kevin Herink, President of the Boater's Association, said it was the worst red tide he has seen in his 11 years in California.

"There were literally thousands of fish starved of oxygen floating on the water," said Herink. "We didn't have a plan to dispose of them. We weren't going to just throw tons of fish into the trashcan."

Red tide is a natural phenomenon. Ocean algae reproduce, or bloom using the energy of the sun. When the sun goes down and photosynthesis can no longer occur, the algae produces carbon dioxide and consumes oxygen. The concentration of the algae reflects the light of the sun, and when most dense, looks red.

While the process seems harmless enough, the consumption of the oxygen by the millions of algae produced in the bloom can suffocate ocean life.

The red tide brought Herink and the Boater's Association to a meeting with Gin and Cagle. The group decided unanimously that a task force was needed to organize some sort of emergency protocol for disasters like red tide. But what began as an idea for an "emergency response team" has become much more extensive.

It seems that the massive fish die-off in Redondo's harbor was merely a seagull picnic compared to some environmental issues the water quality task force will investigate.

The lift station along Portofino Way is a big source of pollution, says Herink. The stations are used to pump sewage up the hill and away from the harbor to be treated. But when backed up the station can cause raw sewage to run into the harbor, as it did in 2004. Similarly, a grease clog caused 10,000 gallons of sewage to enter the ocean at Sapphire St. in September of last year.

Gin has set three goals for the task force: to educate residents and businesses on the importance of clean water, set up protocol for future environmental disasters, and educate the mayor and council on the best practices for meeting water safety regulations.

"I want some concrete recommendations, so we can make good decisions on how to move forward," Gin said. "The ocean is a huge economic engine for our city. It's important to keep it clean." ER