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SECTION B

JU graduation 2
Edward Waters graduation 10
Call Box 11
What's happening 11

METRO

Navy base studied as possible source of fish disease

By Beverly Keneagy

For about five years, one researcher after another has been trying to determine what is causing fish in the St. Johns River to rot alive.

Research conducted last year shows it could be caused by a fungus in the marine environment.

A researcher in the same project said the outbreak could be triggered by industrial pollution, particularly that from Jacksonville's Talleyrand area near downtown.

More recently, Neal Boehnke, a chemistry professor at Jacksonville University, has been researching whether those pollutants could be from the Jacksonville Naval Air Station.

The Navy, which has a 3,800-acre operation on the western bank of the St. Johns River, has numerous hazardous waste sites on the base. According to state environmental officials, the Navy is the largest

generator of hazardous waste in Northeast Florida.

Boehnke said he thinks there could be a link between the mysterious fish disease and the Navy's waste.

Boehnke, who has been studying the fish disease on his own for five years, said he began to consider the Navy as the source of pollution after analyzing diseased fish that contained high levels of heavy toxins and petroleum hydrocarbons.

The results indicated the presence of metals and solvents, along with oils used for lubricating engines, he said.

That led him to the Navy, particularly the Naval Aviation Depot, where solvents are used to strip paint from aircraft being overhauled.

The Navy has mishandled the disposal of hazardous waste in the past and the Florida Department of Environmental Regulation still encounters hazardous waste violations at the base.

"I had known that the Navy dumped oils into pits in the past. This just seemed to tie everything together," Boehnke said. "If you're looking for [pollution] sources, it's a good starting point because of their past disposal problems."

Boehnke, whose theory is dismissed by the Navy, acknowledges the Navy's pollution problems might not be linked to the fish disease, known as ulcerated disease syndrome. He said he plans to conduct further research.

Navy spokesman Nick Young said he was aware of Boehnke's study but refused to comment on it.

However, he did say that the bulk of Boehnke's report came from pollution studies that were prepared by Navy consultants and are on file with the DER.

There are no direct sources of pollution from the base into the St. Johns River, Young said.

"We do not think those [waste sites] that

are existent on the base have a pathway to the St. Johns River," he said.

Young refused a reporter's request for an interview with Jerry Wallmeyer, the base's environmental director.

The Navy base has a variety of hazardous waste sites that need to be cleaned up, according to the Navy consultant reports filed with the DER.

Some of the contaminated sites are near the St. Johns River or storm drains that discharge into the river. Contaminants are in the soil and the groundwater, which flows toward the river, the reports said.

Diseased fish began showing up in the St. Johns River in 1984 when fishermen began catching fish with lesions on their flanks, bellies and heads. The disease seems to be more prevalent in fish that tend to rest on the river bottom, such as flounder, trout and menhaden.

A study sponsored by the DER that was

completed last year found diseased fish in an area extending from Blount Island south to Lake George, near the Ocala National Forest. The greatest number of diseased fish were found in Jacksonville's industrial Talleyrand area.

The study concluded that the fish disease is caused by a fungus known as aphromyces, said Tom Savage, a DER biologist who coordinated the study.

Savage said the researchers think the fish disease is brought on by pollutants that make the fish weak and susceptible to the fungus. Researchers have not been able to link any particular pollutant to the disease.

"We haven't pinpointed something we can do about it," Savage said. "They don't know what triggers the climate for the fungus to spread, and do the damage it does."

Savage said he was not aware of

(See RESEARCHER, Page B-6)

Researcher alone in study of Navy base for fish disease

(From Page B-1)

Boehnke's research, but said the idea might not be too farfetched.

"It's certainly worthwhile investigating," he said.

Neither the DER nor any other government agency has immediate plans to continue studying the fish disease. Boehnke is the only person who is still researching the disease.

Chuck Flowe, a water pollution engineer at Jacksonville's Bio-Environmental Services Division, said

he does not think that anyone else's report does not support the conclusion. source could be responsible for producing pollution that could trigger the fish disease.

"The Navy has the pollutants he's [Boehnke] discussing and so do other locations," Flowe said.

He said Boehnke's study fails to provide sufficient evidence that the Navy could be responsible for the fish disease.

"There's no information to justify his conclusion," Flowe said. "By itself, it is not an adequate indictment. The information presented in

his report does not support the conclusion."

Boehnke said he is aware that others might be skeptical of his research. He also realizes it might be controversial to suggest the Navy has a pollution problem that could possibly be linked to the fish disease.

Ulcerated disease syndrome is not unique to the St. Johns River. Similarly diseased fish have been found as far north as the Hudson River in New York and in coastal Virginia and North Carolina.

On the East Coast, there are two Navy aviation depots similar to the one in Jacksonville; at the Cherry Point Marine Corps Air Station in North Carolina, near the Pamlico and Albemarle sounds, where diseased fish have been found; and at the Norfolk, Va., Naval Air Station near the Chesapeake Bay, where diseased fish also have been found.

However, there are no aviation depots near the Hudson River in

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