Fish not fit to eat, but no one's finding out why

By Beverly Keneagy
Environmental writer

For years, fishermen in the St. Johns River have been pulling in fish that aren't fit for the frying pan.

The fish have raw, gaping sores on their flanks, bellies and mouths — lesions that eat through living flesh, exposing bones and internal organs.

A RIVER IN DECLINE

The fishermen aren't likely to be shocked at the gruesome state of their catch — they're used to it. Most don't even notify an environmental agency.

Why bother?

No one knows what is causing St. Johns River fish to rot alive. And no one is even studying to find out.

"I think it's a mistake not to find out," said Larry Gilmore, a commercial fisherman who has worked Jacksonville waters for more than 20 years. "The state owes the people at least a shot at it. We're fishing for the consumer. I want a decent product to offer the people."

Neal Boehnke, a chemist at Jacksonville University, had studied the fish disease since it surfaced seven years ago but ran out of research money to continue.

Boehnke said he can't understand why the state isn't working to find the cause of the disease.

"I would say it's a top priority," he said. "To me, it's reflective of the state of the river."

He and others see the disease as just another sign of the ailing health of the St. Johns, polluted by malfunctioning sewage treatment plants, leaking septic tanks, industry and stormwater runoff.

— Dennis Hamilton/staff

Neal Boehnke, a chemist at Jacksonville University, once studied a disease of fish in the St. Johns River. But research money ran out. Refunding isn't a state priority.

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Diseased fish in St. Johns not priority for DNR study

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The fish disease seems to have subsided in the Jacksonville area, at least for now, fishermen say. The disease reached epidemic proportions in the mid 1980s, and since has gone through peaks and valleys.

In 1987, the Legislature authorized $250,000 to study the problem. Two years later, funds for the study dried up with no major breakthroughs.

Who's responsible for studying the disease? All fingers point to the Florida Department of Natural Resources, which is charged with protecting the state's saltwater fish.

"We are concerned," said George Henderson, a research scientist at the DNR's Marine Resources Institute in St. Petersburg. "We do intend to get some studies done eventually, but it's not a priority now."

Fingers also point to the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission, which is responsible for the state's freshwater fisheries. The St. Johns is home to both saltwater and freshwater fish.

"The problem kind of dissipated," said Fred Cross, the game and fish commission's project leader for the St. Johns River lower basin, which includes Jacksonville. "We didn't want to waste the taxpayers' money studying something that's not there."

But in North Carolina, where diseased fish also have been found, research is continuing whether the disease is on an upswing or a decline, said Ed Noga, a veterinarian at North Carolina State University in Raleigh.

Noga, who was a member of the Florida research team, said it's a mistake for the state to slack off in its research.

"It's very shaky to say that, since it's not common, we don't have to worry about it," he said. "I think it's important to have the big picture and find the stress that leads to the disease."

The research in Florida found the ulcers are started by a bacterial infection compounded by a fungus, said George Burgess, an ichthyologist, or fish expert, at the University of Florida. Burgess was on the state's research team.

The bacteria and fungus are common — something fish usually can resist, he said. The question is, what is causing their immune systems to break down?

Pollution, perhaps.

Burgess found there was a higher incidence of diseased fish in areas of the river that are known to be heavily contaminated, such as Jacksonville's highly industrialized Talleyrand area.

"It's likely the disease outbreak was exacerbated in areas with additional pollutants," he said.

The DNR's Henderson said that, although his agency is not studying the problem now, he's hopeful that research being conducted by the St. Johns River Water Management District might help.

The district is collecting fish in the lower basin of the river and analyzing their tissue for toxic chemicals. The study is part of the state's Surface Water Improvement and Management program, which has targeted the St. Johns River for cleanup.

Although the results of the study will be used to help the water management district prioritize areas of the river for cleanup, the information will be shared with the DNR, said John Schell, a toxicologist involved in the study.

Schell, who was not involved in the initial study of the fish ulcers, said he thinks the researchers went about it wrong because they did not study the tissue of the diseased fish.

His theory is that some fish might be stressed anyway, and when they are exposed to contaminants such as dioxin or polychlorinated biphenyls, their immune systems break down and they are unable to fight off disease.

While the fish ulcer outbreaks have subsided in the Jacksonville area, similar outbreaks have been found over the past several summers in catfish in Rice Creek in Palatka, where the Georgia Pacific Corp. paper mill discharges 29 million gallons of treated wastewater a day.

The water management district and the game and fish commission have sampled the catfish and are awaiting the results.

And though the diseased fish aren't that common in the lower St. Johns for the moment, officials are sure that won't last.

"It seems clear historically that outbreaks up and down the East Coast have come and gone," said Burgess, the UF fish expert. "It's predictable we'll see this situation occur again."

In the meantime, while further study remains in limbo, the fishermen — and the fish — remain without help.

"We want to find out what's wrong," said Gilmore, the Jacksonville fisherman. "Maybe it's being caused by something nobody wants to say."