

# Large fish kill causes concern

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NORWALK -- Hundreds of silvery fish floated atop the waters of the Norwalk River and harbor yesterday around the Stroffolino Bridge.

Dead bunker fish were washed up against the shore and on the boat landing at the David S. Dunavan Boating Center at Veterans Memorial Park.

In one spot, more than 50 lifeless bunkers crammed together with dead plants and trash in the water by the southeast side of the bridge.



(Chris Prevolos/Staff photo)

Dick Harris, director of the Westport-based Harbor Watch/River Watch program, estimates several thousand bunkers have died in the past few weeks.

"Obviously, everybody's concerned," said Harris, whose program monitors water quality.

Hypoxia, a shortage of oxygen in the water, is causing the animals to die en masse in the largest fish kill Norwalk has seen in several years, observers said. But the news isn't all bad.

Water quality in the harbor has been improving in recent years, and some species of fish have begun returning after their numbers dropped precipitously when the lobsters disappeared in the late 1990s, Harris said.

He called the current bunker kill a "big, unwanted setback" but said the problem will clear up with cooler weather and the absence of fish using up oxygen.

Henry Hernandez fishes yesterday off a pier behind the Maritime Aquarium at Norwalk, where dead fish are floating on the Norwalk River. It is estimated that several thousand bunkers have died in the past few weeks. Hypoxia, or lack of oxygen, is blamed.

Most of the dead animals -- generally bunkers, but likely also some bluefish -- are perishing upstream from the Stroffolino Bridge, in an area where oxygen is low for a combination of reasons, Harris said.

Pedestrians on the bridge yesterday stopped to look at the spectacle of hundreds of fish, several inches to one foot long, motionless in the waters below.

The decomposing marine life created a sickening stench at the Dunavan boating center. The smell Wednesday forced staff at the center's booth to close the doors, said Dave Mahoney, a special constable in the city's Recreation and Parks Department.

Dave Simpson, supervising fisheries biologist for the state Department of Environmental Protection, said the die-off in the Norwalk River was one of two reported fish kills yesterday. The other was near the Rhode Island border in Stonington.

Simpson said the fact that only one species of fish died is a good sign -- indicating it wasn't the result of a sewage or pollution spill.

He said bunker schools tend to ball up very tightly and when they enter areas of low oxygen, they succumb to the added demand for oxygen.

"In smaller water bodies, it's more likely to happen," Simpson said.

The summer's heat combined with high bacteria counts in the Norwalk River produced early indicators in July that a fish kill was imminent, said Joe Schnierlein, manager of professional development at The Maritime Aquarium at Norwalk.

The bacteria is nurtured by rainwater runoff from land and robs the water of oxygen producing a condition known as hypoxia. The lack of oxygen is exacerbated by the heat.

"The combination of Mother Nature and a little bit of man just set it off," Schnierlein said.

"When a large school of fish comes in to an area with little oxygen, they get confused and because of the lack of oxygen, they're like people, they get more confused and they die," Schnierlein said.

Schnierlein said fish kills are fairly common, particularly in August and September when the waters warm up. He said the kill spotted this week is not as big as others in the past.

"Years past, we had massive bunker kills," said Rick Mola, who owns Fisherman's World on Fort Point Street.

Harris said in the late 1980s and early 1990s, fish kills occurred in Norwalk in which masses likely numbering in the millions would die in a single event. Since then, Norwalk's upgraded sewage treatment plant has improved the harbor's water quality, he said.

This year's kill started about three weeks ago, when 10 to 15 dead bunkers at a time began turning up, Harris said. The two main catalysts behind the event are high water temperatures and a "huge" influx of fish, he said.

Bluefish are chasing "big, big schools" of bunkers past the Yankee Doodle Bridge, pushing a large concentration into an area where oxygen levels are already problematic, Harris said.

Fish need an oxygen level of at least three parts per million to survive. North of the Yankee Doodle Bridge, a recent measurement showed about one part per million of oxygen at the bottom of the water. A "borderline" oxygen level of perhaps three parts per million was found at the top, Harris said.

Reasons for low oxygen levels include high temperatures, the Norwalk River's low level due to lack of rain and worsened water circulation in the harbor because of man-made changes -- primarily the elimination of marshes, Harris said. He said ways to boost oxygen levels should be explored.

Scott Kuykendall first spotted the floating fish corpses in the Norwalk River earlier this week. First there were a few, then there were hundreds.

"It's a little stinky down here," Kuykendall said from his home on the banks of the river in East Norwalk.

"We're having a party out on our patio (Friday) night," Kuykendall said. "I was thinking of going out on my kayak to scoop out the bodies so it doesn't smell, but it may not make a difference."