

Damage to wildlife minimal

By Elizabeth Redden, Delaware State News

DOVER - A late April oil spill on the Delaware Bay defied nearly all negative projections.

The small spill occurred just weeks before horseshoe crabs and migratory shorebirds were expected to return to Delaware's bay beaches for their annual spring visit.

Delaware's horseshoe crab harvest is one of the largest in the world and the birds that feed on the crabs' eggs - including the threatened red knot - come to feast on the state's shoreline each May.

As cleanup efforts officially came to a close this week, most of the crabs and birds had been spared.

Balls of congealed oil - ranging in size from dimes to baseballs - had washed up on Delaware's beaches, but their presence was sporadic.

Many animals were able to avoid direct contact with the April 25 spill.

While there were 22 sightings of oiled birds, none needed to be rescued for rehabilitation, said Dr. Heidi Stout, director of oil programs for Tri-State Bird Rescue.

Most of the sighted birds just had specks of oil on their feathers and none showed signs of debilitation, she said.

Stew Michels, a fisheries scientist for the state Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control, said scientists observed just "a smudge of tar" on a single horseshoe crab.

Glenn Gauvry, director of the Ecological Research and Development Group, a Lewes-based organization dedicated to the horseshoe crab, said "he's relieved," though he wouldn't necessarily know if a contaminated food supply could cause hidden dangers.

While the final beaches were checked off this week as clean, environmentalists and state officials will be closely monitoring the shores for signs of more obscure threats.

"We didn't find any dead birds, we found oiled birds, but not too many, the horseshoe crabs were not contaminated to any great degree," said DNREC Secretary John A. Hughes.

"But I'm not willing to say that the eggs that will be laid won't be contaminated and maybe damaged by residual oils that are impossible to clean up unless you remove the beach and put a new beach in place.

"There are things you can't do. You can't get rid of the last molecule. But the last molecule can kill an egg."

Urgency?

Coast Guard officials have traced the source of the spill to a leak and a break on the Bermuda Islander, a 340-foot Netherlands-based container ship.

Coast Guard spokesman Lt. Richard Minnick said there were some piping and overflow problems with the ship.

Its owner/manager, JR Shipping, has taken over cleanup costs, which Mr. Hughes estimated are in the hundreds of thousands of dollars, maybe more.

Lt. Minnick said there is no estimate of the size of the spill.

The spill was considered small and was nowhere near as large as the November 2004 Athos I spill, which dumped more than 250,000 gallons of fuel into the Delaware River near Philadelphia.

Fred Stine, volunteer coordinator for the Delaware Riverkeeper Network, said April's spill was one more assault on a resource already threatened by runoff, sedimentation and deforestation, which can result in higher water temperatures.

Mr. Stine said they may never know the impact on migratory fish species, including the alewife, which returns to freshwater streams and lakes to spawn each May and June after years spent at sea.

"I think we minimalize everything," he said.

"We measure the impact of oil spills based on the number of shorebirds that are killed, which is one form of measure.

"But that doesn't count the number of birds that we didn't spot, that doesn't count the muskrats and the raccoons and all the insects that were affected."

Mr. Stine criticized the response effort, saying volunteers from his organization did not observe a sufficient number of cleanup crews, "and the ones that we did see, there was no sense of urgency in the cleanup."

"Our concern was that if there's no sense of urgency, and that tar that's right now in penny-size globs on the beach is allowed to wash back into the ocean with the high tide, then you've missed an opportunity to prevent that oil contamination from returning to the environment," he said.

Closing of cleanup

The last beach was certified as meeting pre-established cleanup standards this week and active cleanup efforts are complete, the Coast Guard announced Friday.

Mr. Hughes said the cleanup, which was largely completed by contract crews, met his expectations.

"I wanted the beaches clean for the arrival of the horseshoe crabs and the red knots," he said.

"I believe they've been properly cleaned and we've avoided what certainly could have been a greater environmental impact.

"I don't expect a mechanized, letter-perfect cleanup from an oil spill. I've seen enough of them in my life that I no longer have those expectations."

Jamie Bethard, an environmental scientist for DNREC, said the beaches had to meet a standard of cleanliness determined by a coalition that included federal and state wildlife officials.

Higher standards are in place for areas designated as especially sensitive.

"It's not 100-percent removal; it's as best as practical that meets the endpoint standards that have been established," Mr. Bethard said.

Though the active cleanup is over, an active monitoring plan is in place in the event that any further oil is sighted.

To report sightings of oil, call the National Response Center at (800) 424-8802.

Mr. Hughes said the agency also will be closely monitoring the water and beaches in the coming months.

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