

Groups trying to focus red-tide efforts

By Gerald A. Rogovin
Correspondent

Coughing, sneezing, eye irritation and some fish kills were reported at several of the 16 Sarasota County beaches tested earlier this week by the county health department, as red tide continued its northward advance in the Gulf of Mexico.

Higher-than-normal levels of the microscopic alga known as *Karenia brevis* were found at Manasota Beach, Venice Inlet and Blind Pass near Englewood. High respiratory irritation and fish kills were found at Manasota Beach, according to David Pouso, coordinator of the Healthy Beaches Program of the department. He tested the beaches on Tuesday.

Venice Beach tested at more than 3.5 million cells per liter of water. A high level is about 1 million cpl. Pouso recorded high respiratory irritation and fish kills.

Medium to low respiratory irritations were reported on the same day at Nokomis and North Jetty beaches, the Venice fishing pier and Caspersen Beach. Probable fish kills were noted at North Jetty Beach and the Venice fishing pier.

Beach water samples are collected weekly at the 16 beaches, and analyzed for enterococci, fecal coliform bacteria and *Karenia brevis*. Health advisories and warnings are issued if those conditions are confirmed because they may kill marine animals and affect humans.

Forums

In an effort under way since January, and stepped up in response to the latest return of red tide to the area, the county health department and citizens groups have scheduled meetings in the next two weeks to make the public more aware of red tide, a fact of life along the Gulf Coast since it was first detected in the 1840s.

Property owners in the watershed that draws from Dona and Roberts bays have been invited by the county to review a progress report on those waters on Saturday, Aug. 26. Three scientists will explain how citizens can work with the county to improve the estuaries. The meeting is scheduled to begin at 9 a.m. at the Venice Community Center, 326 S. Nokomis Ave., Venice.

Five days later, the fourth of a series of five forums held since January will be held in North Port. Charles H. Henry, environmental administrator of the department, will review environmental health programs being carried out in the county. The meeting will be held at the George Mullin Center, 4956 City Center Blvd., from 7-9 p.m.

On PACE EH

Both meetings are part of a collaboration of the county and citizens groups focusing on the solution of environmental health problems.

Titled PACE EH (protocol for assessment of excellence in environmental health), the collaboration was initiated in December 2005. A nationwide program, the Sarasota County version has brought together residents, county staffers, educational institutions, environmental groups and nonprofit organizations.

PACE EH treats all of the county as one of five watersheds, said Pouso. The five are Sarasota Bay, Little Sarasota Bay, Dona and Roberts bays, the Myakka River and Lemon Bay.

A forum on red tide has been set for the end of the month by the Healthy Gulf Coalition, a citizens group, and the Sierra Club, for residents of Venice and Englewood.

The HGC will focus at the meeting on its belief that the only way to overcome the intensity and longevity of red tide and other harmful algal blooms is to reduce the flow of fertilizers, other land-based nutrients and stormwater into area waters.

HGC has been seeking a county ordinance to restrict the use of fertilizers in the rainy season.

Residents living in beach areas affected by the red tide are being advised to close their windows, and run their air conditioners. If they go outside, paper filter masks are recommended, especially if onshore winds are blowing, according to the county Parks and Recreation Department.

Daily red tide beach updates are available from the department at 346-0079.