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FOSTER'S DAILY DEMOCRAT

Trying to crack the lobster riddle

Yard hunts for answer to increased lead levels in some shellfish specimens and not others

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A Special Report

KITTERY, Maine — Environmental officials are still trying to determine the extent of lead contamination in waters surrounding the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard.

A preliminary study of juvenile lobster, sediment and mussels released in November indicated soil erosion from the site of the Defense Reutilization and Marketing Office might have increased the Piscataqua River's level of lead contamination.

The Problem

In terms of possible lead contamination, data taken from a juvenile lobster sample indicated a significant increase. In the only area with previous data for comparison, Sullivan Point, sampling of juvenile lobsters from 1991 to 1993 indicated 0.04 to 0.05 milligrams of lead per kilogram of lobster.

The September study yielded .342 milligrams per kilogram in the same location.

However, the sample taken from the waters directly off the shore of the Superfund site yielded 4.59 milligrams of lead per kilogram of lobster meat. That number is 10 times higher than samples from other shipyard sites and almost 100 times higher than samples taken at other locations along the river.

As to potential risk for humans, both Maine and New Hampshire currently have seafood advisories in effect, noted Iver McLeod of the Maine Department of Environmental Protection. "They state that nursing and pregnant women limit their intake of lobster tamale and all others should limit consumption of lob-

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ster tamale to one meal per month," he said.

McLeod explained juvenile lobsters are studied in a case like this because they are more sedentary than mature lobsters.

"Older lobsters may have moved away from the location where the contaminants are," he said. "As the lobster gets older, it is too hard to pinpoint where the contamination occurred."

The site of the erosion is one of 14 locations at the shipyard in various stages of investigation under the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation and Liability Act. Approximately 40 years ago, it was used for the storage of lead batteries. Those batteries are considered the primary cause for lead contamination in the soil.

The study, which was conducted in September by the Navy's Northern Division Naval Facilities Engineering Command, was ordered after shipyard officials notified the Environmental Protection Agency of erosion.

While the amount of lead found in lobster meat increased, the study also indicated levels of lead in mussels were within the range of the mussel samples collected during similar studies in 1991 and 1993 and showed no significant increase for risk in that specific area.

Comparative data was not available for the sediment samples in the water just off the site of the erosion; however, samples taken from two other sites along the shipyard showed a decrease in lead contamination from those listed in 1991 and 1993.

Because the juvenile lobster sample came in so much higher for lead content than the other samples taken, a second sampling is in progress to determine whether the results are a true representation of possible contamination. The results of that second round of tests are not yet available.

A preliminary study of the results by a toxicologist indicated the lead levels were high enough to cause concern, McLeod said.

When asked whether he could foresee a potential threat to the lobster industry based on the study's indications, McLeod said he understands harvesting shellfish is already prohibited in the waters off the coast of the shipyard.

The Department of Environmental Protection is continuing to review the study's implications.

The Preliminary Solution

Once shipyard officials realized the bank along the Defense Reuti-

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lization and Marketing Office site was eroding, they took steps to initiate an emergency plan to stabilize the area.

A month-long project by Foster Wheeler Environmental Corporation of New Jersey culminated in November with the construction of a 600-foot retaining wall along the bank. The retaining wall is connected to the cap that was placed on the Superfund site in 1993 to keep rainwater from leeching into the soil and taking with it contaminants such as lead.

"The recent slope stabilization project at the Defense Reutilization and Marketing Office was completed at a cost of approximately $370,000," said Shipyard Public Affairs Officer Alan Robinson. The retaining wall came in significantly below the budgeted figure of $500,000.

Robinson said the interim corrective measure of capping the site in 1993 cost $307,696.

Like the retaining wall, that cap was built to temporarily stabilize the site until the shipyard's Restoration Advisory Board can work with Environmental Protection Agency and Department of Environmental Protection officials on a permanent solution through the Superfund process timeline.

As part of that process, a preferred alternative will be selected by the Navy and presented to the community for comment at a public meeting.

"Until this preferred alternative is selected and implemented, the cost of the final remedial action is not known," Robinson said.

The Defense Reutilization and Modernization Office site is still in the remedial investigation phase of the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation and Liability Act process. According to the timeline established by the EPA, Maine DEP and Shipyard Restoration Advisory Board, a final remedy to that site will be implemented by 2007.

Cleaning Up After the Past

Currently, the first priority is on the more extensively polluted Jamaica Island Landfill — another site in the Superfund process.

"The Jamaica Island Landfill was in operation from 1945 until 1978," explained Robinson. "The 25-acre site which was formerly tidal mud flats was filled with construction debris, spent sandblast grit, dredge spoils and unknown amounts of materials containing hazardous cor stituents."

McLeod confirmed the contam nants located at the landfill an noted there are several other site used for disposal in previou decades.

Other toxins that have been foun and removed or are in the process c being dealt with include ash from former incinerator site, solvents an metals, McLeod said.

The investigation process for th Jamaica Island Landfill is nearin its end and the Environmental Pro tection Agency, Department of Envi ronmental Protection and shipyard' Restoration Advisory Board ar reviewing a range of remedial alter natives for the site based on thos studies.

"In the summer of 2000 the Nav will propose its preferred alternativ to the Jamaica Island Landfill to th public and invite comments from th public on the proposed remedy, Robinson said.

As part of the restoration proces Robinson explained, a mercury bu ial vault — containing several cor tainers of mercury-contaminate waste such as thermometers, gauge and rags — was removed from th landfill and transferred to a license disposal site off the shipyard in 199

The September study of juvenil lobster, mussels and sedimer marked the first round of approx mately five years of planned revie in the area. The second round i scheduled for the spring.