

Oxnard awaits aerators for Channel Islands Harbor as water quality improves

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(Photo: WENDY LEUNG/THE STAR)

The water quality at Channel Islands Harbor has similarities with Redondo Beach, experts said.

Except the water is improving at the Oxnard harbor while tons of dead fish were found in Redondo Beach in 2005 and again in 2011.

The culprit in both communities was algae bloom. Algae sucks up oxygen from the water, causing fish to die.

"When these things happen ... people are up in arms because the water they love and enjoy all of a sudden turns bad on them," said David Caron, a professor of biological sciences at USC. "They kind of feel like all hell is breaking loose and the bottom has dropped out and it's the end of the world. That's not the case."

Caron is part of a team of biologists hired by Oxnard to analyze the water samples taken since discoloration and an odor were first noticed at Channel Islands Harbor a month ago. During a meeting Wednesday of the [Channel Islands Harbor Task Force \(https://www.oxnard.org/channel-islands-harbor-water-quality-is-safe-and-improving/\)](https://www.oxnard.org/channel-islands-harbor-water-quality-is-safe-and-improving/), which consists of Mayor Tim Flynn and Councilman Bert Perello, next steps were presented.

More on Channel Islands Harbor:

- [Channel Islands Harbor's water is brown but safe, Oxnard officials say \(/story/news/2018/06/27/oxnard-officials-channel-islands-harbor-water-safe/737245002/\)](/story/news/2018/06/27/oxnard-officials-channel-islands-harbor-water-safe/737245002/)
- [Oxnard seeks outside help to analyze Channel Islands Harbor water \(/story/news/2018/07/09/oxnard-channel-islands-harbor-water-outside-help-analyze/751989002/\)](/story/news/2018/07/09/oxnard-channel-islands-harbor-water-outside-help-analyze/751989002/)

The city has ordered several aeration diffusers to be installed in an area of the harbor with the lowest oxygen levels. They are expected to arrive in the next 10 days. The devices are expected to aerate the water, and the city will monitor the situation to see if it further improves.

Remote sensors are also expected to be installed to continuously monitor the oxygen, pH and chlorophyll levels.

With water quality improving at the harbor, the city will reduce its sampling schedule from five to two times a week. More samples will be collected in the event of another algae bloom, which experts said may or may not return later this summer.

The algae bloom isn't unique to California, Caron said.

"We're reaching a point in all coastal systems, not just in Southern California, but globally, where we now recognize there are enough nutrients in this system that they're supporting more algae than we want present," he said.

Caron describes the coastal system as "teetering on the brink."

"We as humans release nutrients into the water. ... We have agriculture, and the same nutrients that grow the plants grow the algae," Caron said. "We have urbanization that channels all the runoff into these areas. Over time, we get to a point where these systems deal with it day by day, and it's a delicate balance of whether we get to a catastrophic event."

Although the water at Channel Islands Harbor has been deemed safe and residents can continue to swim in it, the community is still alarmed by how brown and murky it is.

Some residents say there is foam and scum at the surface. Some say the water looks better than it did last month. Some say it only appears better during high tide.

Tony Rondinella, a Channel Islands Harbor resident, said he hopes the city gets to the root of the problem.

"My concern is we do all this testing and we don't fix the problem," Rondinella said. "Aeration is good, but if nutrients are coming in, it's going to be a problem."

NRG Energy Inc. stopped operating its nearby plant in February, and many suspect that is the reason for a change in water quality. The plant had water pumps that used ocean water to cool down operations, thereby creating circulation in the nearby canal.

Some residents don't understand why the power plant can't operate its water pumps once again. By state law, power plants that use ocean water like the one in Oxnard must cease operations by the end of 2020.

"If we did get the power plant going up to that date, we'd just be postponing the issue that's going on right now," Perello said. "I don't know what the fix is, but the city is not going to run away from the fix."

These ancillary issues with the power plant closure were anticipated by officials.

When Seabridge and Westport were being developed at the harbor, city and county officials considered what steps to take when the power plant shut down, according to Assistant City Attorney Ken Rozell. City leaders are looking into those agreements about remediation measures made in the early 2000s.

Multiple groups could be stuck with the bill, including community facility districts, waterways assessment district, the city and the county.

"There are a lot of parties at the table," Rozell said. "This will not be a cheap solution, but we will continue the analysis."

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