Biologists monitor spread of red algae

Plant clogs shrimp nets along the coast

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Biologists are monitoring red algae that has popped up around the Lowcountry and will be checking its possible spread to other parts of the coast, including Winyah Bay in Georgetown County.

The spreading seaweed, which has been clogging shrimp nets in South Carolina this year, is now growing in profusion in the Charleston Harbor, said David Whitaker, a biologist with the S.C. Department of Natural Resources.

Fishermen traveling the coast have heard from others that the commercial shrimping nets have been tangled in the invasive plant to the point where their nets were destroyed.

"It's pretty bad from Charleston to Rockville," said Donald Jordan, who owns the shrimp boat, Kelly Ann, out of Georgetown County. "From Charleston on south is where it seems to be worse. I heard it was tearing some nets up."

The plant, known as gracilaria, has been seen in the North Inlet Estuary in Georgetown County and could soon spread to Winyah Bay, said Erik Sotka, an assistant professor at the College of Charleston.

Sotka plans to come to Georgetown County within the next month to determine the extent of the problem in the North Inlet Estuary.

"It has not hit there in large amounts yet, but it is there," he said. "We have seen huge amounts in Charleston Harbor, and we know it goes all the way through into Georgia. There is no reason to think it won't be in Winyah Bay."

Gracilaria has been seen on mud flats and throughout the Intracoastal Waterway, Sotka said.

Shrimp fishermen are lodging numerous complaints this year about gracilaria destroying their nets. The commercial shrimp fishing season in South Carolina opened in May and will remain open until January.

"We're intensely sampling up and down the coast, and Georgetown," Sotka said. "Just about every mud flat we look at, we see this invasive seaweed."

The seaweed is a drifting plant, but can be destroyed if fishermen bring it on board and then leave it in a pile on land. The plant will survive and grow even more if it is taken out of fishing nets and returned to the water.

Gracilaria arrived in South Carolina around five years ago, Sotka said.

The plant survives in salty or brackish water and does not die in cold or hot weather.

The plant has also been seen in North Carolina, he said.

It's hard to predict what will happen," Sotka said. "This year, we're having more complaints and on a broader geographic range. We're concerned about the impact that it is having on the shrimpers and the impact on the estuaries."

Meanwhile, another unidentified, invasive, red seaweed has been seen in Charleston Harbor, Sotka said. The algae is also growing in profusion in Charleston Harbor, but has not been seen in other places, he said.

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