

PRESS ADVISORY

July 2, 2010

CONTACT: Valerie Lovett
Public Information Office
(850) 248-8170
Cell: 814-6122

UF/IFAS: Not all sheens oil

After responding to many reports of oil sheens and mousse off Bay County beaches Thursday night and Friday morning, none were confirmed to have been oil product, Bay County Emergency Services Chief Mark Bowen said.

In an effort to assist people in discerning what substances are actually biological in nature, rather than oil product, Franklin County Sea Grant Agent and UF/IFAS Extension Program Director Bill Mahan issued a news release outlining some substances commonly mistaken for oil. The following information may help Bay County residents and visitors determine what might be oil versus a natural substance floating in the water. Bay County still encourages anyone who believes they may spot oil product in the water to report the sighting to the Bay County hotline at 248-6030 or the Florida response hotline at 1-877-272-8335.

Not all sheens on the water, dark spots/blobs on beaches and foamy/frothy material floating around in the water are caused by oil, Mahan says. In fact, Mother Nature produces these oil look-a-likes all the time. This is especially true during this time of the year.

According to Mahan, some of Mother Nature's look-a-like oil spill products include:

Oily Sheen on the Water's Surface: A silvery or rainbow-colored sheen on the water surface may be related to a petroleum product; however, it may also be related to natural biological sources such as the presence of iron, decomposition of organic matter, or the presence of certain bacteria. Naturally occurring sheens are usually silver or relatively dull in color that breaks up into small patches of sheen when disturbed. Petroleum sheens tend to be shiny, rainbow-colored and if disturbed the oil patches will come back together.

Tar Balls: A general description of a tar ball is weathered oil that has formed a pliable ball, varying in size from a pinhead to about a foot across. Sheen may or may not be present around them. At this time, we have had a number of confirmed tar ball reports in the Florida Panhandle. However, before real tar balls were coming ashore, initial tar ball reports in Destin were identified as skate egg cases. Also pieces of peat and small sea cucumbers have been called in as possible tar balls.

Foam Lines/Mousse: Oil, or sheen oriented in lines or streaks out on the water can easily be confused with algal/vegetative scum collected in tidal convergence lines. Sometimes called streaks, stringers or fingers, they are commonly found floating in near and offshore Gulf waters.

They are often a collection of seagrasses, Sargassum/seaweeds and protein scum/foam moving with the tides and wind.

Dark, Oil-like Patches of Sand on the Beach: Several reports of black oil-like patches on the beach have been reported in the Florida Panhandle. When investigated, the dark patches of sand were found to be caused by 'June Grass' clumps of sea grass or several different types of algae that wash up on our beaches in June and other times of the year. These algae and sea grass, as they are moved back and forth by the wave action in the intertidal zone, break up into small dark pieces and can leave behind an area of dark-colored stained sand.

Other Sightings/Rumors: In early May, in the Destin area, a common rumor making the rounds was that sharp glassy fragments washing up on local beaches were fiberglass remains of the booms used to collect the oil out in the Gulf. When investigated, the fragments were the exoskeletons of an animal called a pterpod. Commonly called sea butterflies, these marine snails shed their exoskeleton when they die. The pointed part of the shell can prick people's feet if they step on them. However, they pose no threat to people.

Bill Mahan may be reached at (850) 653-9337, 697-2112 x 360; or via e-mail at bmahan@ufl.edu.