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Red Tide Appears Again On East End

[By Michael Wright](#) Jun 18, 2014 11:11 AM

Toxic “red tide” algal blooms spread across some East End bays again this spring, as they have for the past several years, but chilly weather appears to have kept them in check, scientists said this week.

The first of what has become several annual, and harmful, algal blooms to appear in local waters flowered essentially right on time this year, Stony Brook University marine biologists said, but did not reach the dense levels they have in previous years.

The bright side of the cold weather, it would seem, was that for the first time in seven years no wild shellfish beds were declared off-limits because the bivalves had become tainted with naturally occurring toxins given off by the algae, known as Alexandrium. The dark side is that the potentially deadly algal blooms appeared in waters this year where it had not been seen before, namely Moniebogue Bay in Westhampton Beach.

The species of red tide algae seen each spring in local waters gives off saxitoxin, a neuro-toxin that has been known to cause paralytic shellfish poisoning (PSP), which has sickened hundreds and even caused deaths in the Pacific Northwest in 2010 when people ate shellfish tainted with it. Alexandrium commonly appears in May and fades away as waters warm in early June.

“While the cold spring protected us against severe PSP, we still saw cell densities high enough to make shellfish toxic on the North Shore, East End and South Shore of Long Island,” said Christopher Gobler, Ph.D., a professor at the Stony Brook University School of Marine and Atmospheric Sciences. “These red tides are triggered by warm temperatures and, hence, things began late this year, keeping cell densities in the thousands of cells per liter, rather than tens of thousands.”

Dr. Gobler said that shellfish sampling from local waters revealed no dangerous levels of toxins, but that the densities of the Alexandrium bloom were at levels in some places that could have threatened closures.

The red tide did appear in Moniebogue Bay off Westhampton Beach for the first time, adding it to the list of several other local water bodies, like Weesuck Creek in East Quogue, that harbor the scourge. The algal blooms were not seen in high levels, however, in Sag Harbor Cove, where it had forced the closure of shellfish harvesting each of the last two years.

While the time of year for the blossoming of Alexandrium has passed, scientists will now shift their focus to watching for the annual reemergence of other algal blooms, like the infamous brown tides that still appear in western Shinnecock Bay in early summer and another species of red tide, this one not toxic to humans but fatal to fish and shellfish species, that usually appears in late July or early August.

Dr. Gobler said that researchers from the university are already seeing signs of possible brown tide blooms in the western reaches of Shinnecock Bay.