

Bunker Fish Die Off Investigated In Peconic River, Reeves Bay In Flanders

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[By Shaye Weaver](#)

Tens of thousands of dead bunker fish washed up on the shores of Reeves Bay in Flanders within the last two weeks—the number of fish, and smell, peaking Thursday and Friday.

Southampton Town Trustee Eric Shultz took a small group out on Friday to clean up the fish-kill, picking the fish up with pitchforks, and quickly learned that it would be a massive job to undertake.

“It’s sad to see that many fish die off, and unfortunately

we can’t do anything with them,” he said on Friday after filling a dump truck with dead fish. “When I was up there in the river, there were still a tremendous amount of fish in the river alive—giant schools with blue fish swarming around, chasing them.”

Bunker go into estuaries to spawn and are typically chased into shallow waters by their predators—blue fish and bass—each year. When they are cornered in shallow waters, where there is less oxygen, they suffocate.

“When you have that many fish pushed up into a tight area, that’s what tends to happen,” Mr. Shultz said. “They get starved for oxygen.”

Dr. Christopher Gobler, a marine science professor at Stony Brook University, went into the Peconic River, Terrys Creek, Reeves and Flanders bays and Meetinghouse Creek on Thursday to check out the situation and said that while it wasn’t a surprise, this year’s fish kill was “significantly more intense” than is typical.

“It’s down in the whole area, well beyond Reeves Bay,” Dr. Gobler said, adding that the fish kill started a couple of weeks ago. “These areas are starting with lower levels of oxygen because of heavy nutrient loads. Along with the fish-kill, there are intense algal blooms. Some people call it the mahogany tide. The Peconic River has been sick with this stuff for several weeks.”

Dr. Gobler explained that this particular tide makes oxygen during the day and at night sucks it back in. He said that at midday on Thursday, he measured 1 milligram of oxygen per liter of water. The state Department of Environmental Conservation says that oxygen should never go below 3 milligrams of oxygen per liter, he said. He said it was likely at night the oxygen level was even less.

“This is just a sign of what’s going on with heavy nitrogen loads, which have a bunch of cascading effects on coastal water. It’s emblematic of one of those effects,” he said of the fish-kill. “In that artery, it’s no surprise because the sewage treatment plant is there, its outflow is under the bridge, there is the golf course and the duck farm, and cesspools. In the end it’s this kind of thing that motivates people at the end of the day ... enough is enough.”

Mr. Shultz said his crew took the dead fish to the North Sea landfill and will return to the beaches on Monday.

“It’s a large task to clean all of them up,” he said. “We hope some of them will wash into the bay where their predators are, or will become crab food.”

