



west virginia department of environmental protection

NEWS RELEASE

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DEP actively investigating Dunkard Creek fish kill

The West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection and the Division of Natural Resources, along with a number of other agencies, have been actively investigating the cause of a substantial fish kill in Dunkard Creek, in Monongalia County.

Members of the public first reported seeing dead fish in Dunkard Creek and notified the West Virginia DNR on Sept. 1. At that time, staff from a variety of divisions from the WVDEP and WVDNR visited the scene, began taking samples and started looking for a cause.

“This situation is different from past fish kills the agency has responded to,” said Michael Zeto, the DEP’s Chief of Environmental Enforcement. “Typically, there is a chemical or physical characteristic that points to a single source. Then, we deal with who is responsible from there. However, this fish kill may have several possibilities that could be contributing to the cause.”

“We understand the frustration people are feeling, because we feel it, too,” said Scott Mandirola, director of the DEP’s Division of Water and Waste Management. “That’s why we have large number of people working on this and are working with other agencies to try to determine what could be causing it.”

The WVDEP is working with the WVDNR, the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection, the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and West Virginia University.

Because of heavy mining activity in the area, the industry was an early suspect. In fact, after conferring with the WVDEP, Consol, which operates an active mine in Blacksville, W.Va., agreed to shut off its discharge into Dunkard Creek at its Blacksville No. 2 site. However, at the same time Consol was shutting off its pumps, dead fish were found upstream from its outlet, indicating that the outlet at that site is not the sole cause for the dead fish.

In addition, inspectors checked mine pools from previous mining activity that are often sources of acid mine drainage. However, the water levels in the area are hundreds of feet below stream elevation at this time because the area has not received much rain in recent weeks.

The agencies have also received reports from area residents suspecting tanker trucks of dumping wastewater from oil and gas drilling activities into Dunkard Creek. Various agencies continue to investigate those reports.

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“We have found that those trucks that have been reported are withdrawing water from the stream, rather than dumping wastewater,” Zeto said.

“People think that West Virginia and Pennsylvania have the same regulations regarding the disposal of oil and gas wastewater, but we do not,” Mandirola said. “West Virginia currently has no wastewater treatment plants permitted to accept oil and gas fluid.”

On Friday, Sept. 18, staff members from the DEP flew over the area in a helicopter to see if there was anything they could see from the air that they missed on the ground. The staff noted the stream was clouded with a rust color from the Pennsylvania border upstream to a beaver dam in the South Fork of the West Virginia Fork of Dunkard. As a result, additional staff was brought in to take samples along the 25-mile stretch.

In addition, investigators have solicited the assistance of micro-biologists to help determine whether some form of algae or similar growth may be a contributing factor. Toxins are sometimes produced by algae; and saline environments are sometimes involved with harmful algae blooms.

“The bottom line is we are working diligently to determine all potential causes and put a stop to whatever it is that’s killing the aquatic life in Dunkard Creek. Given that we are investigating several possibilities, it is taking longer to solve than fish kills normally encountered. This one is different from any that we’ve had in recent memory,” Zeto said.