

Lobster die-off linked to pesticides. Fishermen applaud scientific finding. By MARIANGAIL BROWN. mgbrown@ctpost.com

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BRIDGEPORT - Scientific data released Friday shows that it takes far less pesticide than previously thought to kill adult lobsters a finding that lobstermen say provides concrete support that pesticides caused the massive 1999 lobster die-off in Long Island Sound.

"It really doesn't take much to kill lobsters," pathobiologist Sylvain DeGuise told attendees at the Long Island Sound Health Symposium. Researchers at University of Connecticut found a mere 33 parts-per-billion of methoprene killed off half the lobsters in a 20-gallon tank.

"That's [equivalent] to one drop in a billion, or one person in China," DeGuise said. "We [now] have a certain idea of how much of these chemicals are required to kill lobsters at various temperatures.

So there is progress."

DeGuise's assertion appeared to vindicate 50 Long Island Sound lobstermen who were among the 260 scientists, environmentalists and government officials at a conference at the Holiday Inn.

The lobstermen claim DeGuise's research bolsters their claim that the pesticides used to fend off West Nile mosquitoes in 1999 are responsible for the lobsters' massive die-off that bankrupted their industry.

The lobstermen at the conference used DeGuise's report to hammer state officials to disclose how much malathion, resmetherin and other pesticides Connecticut applied in 1999 to fend off West Nile mosquitoes.

That information, the lobstermen say, has never been turned over to the public.

By contrast, state law in New York requires the state Department of Health to maintain a database of all pesticide applications anywhere in New York. The database, however, is only accessible to researchers.

"It's an incredibly unwieldy database. You have to input the zip code you're looking at, a range of dates, as well as all of the [known] names for a given pesticide," said Karen Chytalo, a DEC marine habitat and protection section chief. "I have a massive pile this high," Chytalo said, gesturing about a foot high. "But we just don't have anybody to sift through it."

DeGuise said researchers are interested in knowing how much pesticide may have flowed into Long Island Sound in 1999 when West Nile fever first emerged here.

"What's gone is gone for good," Nick Crismale, president of the Long Island Sound Lobster Association, told DeGuise. "Our concern now is the revitalization of this species. You have exhibited all of this info here that shows these chemicals do impact lobsters. But where are we headed?"

DeGuise responded that researchers hoped to provide "building blocks for better management" of the lobster habitat, as well as "hard data that can not be brushed off by anyone."

Scientists now have much more sophisticated research tools capable of detection as scant as one part per trillionth of some pesticides, DeGuise said, adding that pathobiologists also want to analyze the impact of other pesticides such as resmetherin and malathion in both juvenile and adult lobster mortality.

Yet as welcome as DeGuise's findings were to the lobstermen, many voiced frustration.

"The labels say not to put this stuff in the water and they do and they do it again why?" asked Fred Chifolo, a lobsterman from Brookhaven, N.Y. "Why do they keep using this stuff when they know it's toxic to fish and shellfish?"

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