

Lobstermen Sue Over Pesticides

*Blame Long Island Sound
Lobster Crash on Malathion*

By Catherine Schmitt

In September 1999, malathion was sprayed along the western shores of Long Island Sound to kill mosquitoes that might carry the West Nile virus. Two days later, lobstermen were hauling traps full of dead lobsters. "That was the beginning and the end right there," says Mike Theiler, vice president of the Connecticut Commercial Lobstermen's Association.

Despite initial skepticism, most lobstermen now believe pesticides caused the collapse. The industry has filed a class action lawsuit against the pesticide manufacturers. Scientific research on the effects of pesticides on lobsters, which has increased since the 1999 event, supports the fishermen's claim. "We've had it in our literature forever, watch out for anything that kills bugs," says Dr. Robert Bayer of the Lobster Institute, at the University of Maine in Orono.

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Malathion has traditionally been used as an agricultural pesticide. In the presence of sun and organic matter on farm fields, the chemical breaks down within a week. In Connecticut, however, malathion was sprayed on blacktop and other hard surfaces, where it does not break down as quickly and can be transported to the sea. In the European Union, malathion is approved for use only on agricultural surfaces. Malathion is a neurotoxin, attacking the nervous system of insects. The chemical works the same way on lobsters, animals closely related to insects. A lethal dose can be as low as 33 parts per billion, according to a study conducted by scientists at the University of Connecticut.

"There's no doubt in my mind that this pesticide issue is a huge hurdle for us," says Theiler. In addition to aerial spraying of pesticides along the coast, some towns have placed tablets of the larvicide Methoprene in storm drains to dissolve in the rain and run out to rivers that eventually drain to the sound.

Western Long Island Sound has been hit the hardest, with traps coming up empty in fishing areas off Greenwich, Westport and Huntington. According to Theiler, recent catches in the East have yielded

lobsters with "paper shells," lobsters shedding their shells with eggs on them, and abnormal reproduction and egg development. All of these observations are signs of stress, that the lobsters are making a choice between their own survival and survival of the species, says Bayer.

Long Island Sound lobster landings were worth \$29 million in 1998. There is a moratorium on new lobster licenses in Connecticut because the lobster fishery has been gradually depleted in recent years. The 1999 collapse, however, was a sudden die-off that occurred immediately after pesticide spraying. Reports of the die-off were accompanied by horrific images: traps full of dead lobsters, twitching lobsters, lobsters frantically clawing to escape the water.

There have been indirect effects on the industry infrastructure, with lobster dealers and bait suppliers also suffering. "As far as Connecticut goes, its falling down around us," says Theiler. While many Long Island Sound lobstermen have left the business, some are remaining in hopes of recovery. In fact, the pesticide issue has brought formerly competing fishermen together. "I'm not ready to give it up yet," says Theiler, who awaits a decision on the pending lawsuit. The U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of New York is expected to hand down a decision by the end of June.