

Mack says red-tide funds misused

Wants NOAA focus on research only

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Richard Pierce, senior scientist and director of the Mote Center for Ecotoxicology, fills a jar with a water sample from near Sanibel Island Sunday. Pierce was looking for signs of red tide.

U.S. Rep. Connie Mack IV has called red tide a scourge and a nuisance, but after taking a boat tour around Sanibel Island on Sunday morning, the Fort Myers Republican had only one word for what he hopes will be the toxic algae's future: eliminated.

"This problem is not just a quality-of-life issue, but also an economic issue, an environmental issue that must be addressed," said Mack, who faces re-election in November.

The congressman accompanied researchers from Mote Marine Lab as they collected samples of *Karenia brevis*, or *K. brevis*. The toxin produces microorganisms linked to deaths of hundreds of fish that since June have washed onto Sanibel, Captiva, Fort Myers Beach and elsewhere in Southwest Florida.

After the researchers took the samples to a makeshift lab on Pine Island, Mack announced that one of his legislative priorities will be to lobby for an increase in funds for research into the cause and management of red tide.

"Research doesn't happen in one day," Mack said. "It needs time to find a solution based on science, not politics."

The biggest problem with red-tide research has been a mismanagement of funds by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Mack said.

According to Mack, what is needed is a group of scientists to enforce how money should be spent on research through peer review.

"NOAA already has the group structure, but they haven't utilized it," he said. "I want to let them know that the money they're allotted must go to research, and to research only."

NOAA officials could not be reached for comment Sunday afternoon.

Once the funds have been secured, Mack said, he hopes to invest in research that would help eradicate the recurring algae blooms, which he said are responsible for driving away tourism and endangering Florida wildlife.

"We've only seen the problem get worse, and that must be stopped," Mack said.

However, Mote researcher Richard Pierce doesn't think the complete elimination of red tide would be the ideal solution.

"Like everything in nature, red tide has a role in the Gulf of Mexico ecology, so we can't be completely rid of it," he said.

Pierce said *K. brevis*, like other algae, are energy-producing organisms, and that the dead fish they leave may act as fertilizers for mangroves.

"We can try to reduce the adverse impact on humans and wildlife, but we'll never fully eradicate it," Pierce said.

A better solution would be to invest in red-tide-monitoring units to keep track of the algae flow and the research of substances to help curb its quick reproduction rate, which Pierce estimates will cost \$2 million per year.

"We need the funds to help us understand this organism," Pierce said. "We can't really do anything until we know where it comes from. When we have that, then we can really deal with it."

RED TIDE UPDATE

- The samples collected last Monday around Sanibel Island indicate red-tide levels have fallen significantly since tests were taken a week earlier.
- Red-tide blooms seem to be moving south.
- Red tide is officially declared when samples show a concentration of 5,000 *K. brevis* cells per liter of water. Fish start dying when concentrations reach 50,000 to 100,000.
- The exact number of cells in Monday's sample has not been determined.