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Troublesome algae hits East Branch

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Staff

report

Hancock, N.Y. - Didymo, the invasive, slimy algae that can damage aquatic life, is apparently making its way into New York's world-famous trout waters. DEC officials confirmed that the algae has been found in several locations of the East Branch of the Delaware River, including at the confluence with the Beaverkill River. There was also some indication that the mucus-like algae was present in the West Branch of the Delaware River.

'There were some didymo particles mixed in with another algae,' DEC Fisheries Bureau Chief Doug Stang said. 'And because anglers generally hop from one water to another, we'll likely see it in the Beaverkill, Willowemoc and other waters.' Didymo algae essentially covers a stream bottom and smothers aquatic life. It's been a major problem on New Zealand's famed trout waters, and recently took hold in Canada and some southern states, as well as in Vermont's Batten Kill river. New York's stretch of the Batten Kill saw its first didymo outbreak earlier this year.

'It's problematic,' Stang said. 'Aesthetically, it's a pain in the neck. It's a totally new ecological situation for us, and I would be surprised if it does not extend and we don't see more waters infected.'

Although there's some concern the algae will coat a stream bottom, kill all aquatic life and, in turn, decimate trout populations, New York's battle with viral hemorrhagic septicemia - VHS - is generally seen as more serious, since that directly results in fish kills. Already, VHS has been linked to a major downturn in the St. Lawrence River's muskie population.

Still, didymo is potentially very damaging to the state's storied trout waters. And DEC is undertaking a massive education and outreach effort to advise anglers, canoeists and kayakers how to avoid spreading the algae from one water to another. 'Anglers - and others - need to undertake the practices,' Stang said. 'You need to treat yourself as a potential vector (carrier).'

The algae can cling unseen to waders, boots, boats, lures, hooks, sinkers, fishing line, and other fishing gear and remain viable for several weeks under even slightly moist conditions. Absorbent items, such as felt-soled wader, require thorough treatment after every outing.

Stang actually advises not wearing felt-soled waders, but admits 'there's some safety risk there.'

DEC urges anglers and other water recreationists to 'check, clean and dry' to prevent the introduction and spread of didymo. Before leaving a river or stream, anglers should remove all obvious clumps of algae and look for hidden clumps and leave them at the affected site. If you find any later, do not wash them down drains; dispose of all material in the trash.

They should also soak and scrub all items for at least one minute in either hot (140 degrees Fahrenheit) water, a 2 percent solution of household bleach or a 5 percent solution of salt, antiseptic hand cleaner or dishwashing detergent. If cleaning is not practical, after the item is completely dry, wait an additional 48 hours before contact or use in any other waterway. Check thick, absorbent items closely to assure that they are dry throughout. Equipment and gear also can be placed in a freezer until all moisture is frozen solid. Currently, there are no known

effective methods for controlling or eradicating didymo once it infests a water body. Stang said fly shops have assisted DEC greatly in getting the word out to the angling public. He added that in one sense, he's not sorry to see the fishing season come to an end. 'It certainly will help us and give us a little more time to develop a planned attack,' he said.