

Seaweed Stench

Piles of the stuff rot on shorelines around island; smell, cleanup job overwhelming

By BRIAN PERRY, Staff Writer

ALAELOA. Five or six years ago, the small cove near Alaeloa condominium in West Maui was a pristine shelter for clear water and coral. Now, about 10 months out of the year, it's choked with a red-brown seaweed that piles up on shore, attracting flies when it sits and rots in the hot sun.

"It's gotten progressively worse," says Alaeloa resident and board member Wally Working. "We're just inundated with seaweed."

Alaeloa residents got a reprieve in January and February when wave surges washed away the algae. But beginning in March, condominium groundskeepers began clearing away almost a ton of seaweed a day from Alaeloa's small beach area, according to Working.

Costs are piling up too. Working says the condominium pays \$3,000 a month for labor and garbage bags to clear the beach.

The mess at Alaeloa is one facet of a seaweed problem that just won't go away.

In the late-1980s, the so-called algae blooms were reported as episodic onslaughts of green, hair-like slime that fouled West Maui waters and washed up on beaches.

Now, the predominant pest is the red-brown seaweed known as *hymea musciformis*. The alien algae, which apparently escaped efforts to tame it as an aquaculture product, has found its niche in waters up to 5 feet deep.

Aside from shoreline areas from Honokowai to Napili in West Maui, other areas hard hit by seaweed include Kihel's coast from Soda Store to Star Market, Kahului Harbor and Kua in Paia.

Ron Lando-Brown, resident manager of the Hoyochi Nikko condominium on Lower Honospillani Road, says one beach cleanup of his property's 170 feet of beachfront yielded 32 wheelbarrow loads of seaweed. On other days, workers hauled away five or six wheelbarrows of the stuff.

The smell of rotting seaweed has become so overpowering at times that Lando-Brown says he has had to leave the 18-unit building.

"One night we slept with bandanas on to try to keep the smell out," he says.

Hoyochi Nikko resident Tim Mitchell said some days the seaweed isn't on the beach, and "you don't notice

it. On other days it has a "sewer, rancid-like smell," and

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\$1.50



Alealoa condominium resident Wally Working holds a clump of totting seaweed he scooped from a pile at the beach by the West Maui property Saturday. Working says it's time to stop just studying the algae blooms and try methods of containing them. "I think it's time to see if there is a solution that works," Working said. "There have been so many studies. We should at least try something." Working suggests using the small bay as a model to see if an intensive cleanup will slow down the seaweed's progress.

Lack of funds hinders cleanup of seaweed

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"It's covered with 'thousands of flies,' he says. "It's really gross. It's a very unpleasant mess."

Jim Ferguson, manager of the 36-unit Lokelani condominium in Honoakwai, says seaweed can be found in the water, on the beach or sometimes on the property's lawn.

"We always have a seaweed problem," he says. "It's always in one place or the other."

At the Maui Sunset in Kihui, seaweed is "a constant problem," according to manager Richard Leith. He said the condominium contributes \$1,000 a month toward having a contractor rake a 500-yard beach five days a week.

In places where the work isn't done, seaweed can pile up as high as three or four feet, Leith said.

Motorists on Kahului Beach Road can get a whiff of the seaweed stench Harbor Lights residents must live with.

Harbor Lights resident manager Lawrence Shim said the smell seems worst during the hottest part of the day from 1 to 3 p.m., but the seaweed odor present the rest of the day is "bad enough."

Residents of the 152-unit complex report feeling nauseous, and complaints are made to county officials who "haven't done anything yet," Shim says.

Shim's disappointment with county efforts is shared by other condominium managers and residents.

Maui County is required by state law to clean beaches of seaweed, lime and debris likely to create an unsanitary condition or, otherwise, become a public nuisance. County officials have said the law is unfair because the state gave the counties responsibility to clear beaches without giving them money to do so.

Department of Public Works and Waste Management Director Charles Jencks says his department does what it can with limited money, equipment and manpower.

Last year, the department awarded a \$30,310 grant to Maui Recycling Service to pick up seaweed that was collected, bagged and brought to the curb.

This year, Maui Recycling submitted another grant request, but it was rejected because of limited funds, Jencks said.

He said he has \$90,000 within his department's budget this year for seaweed cleanup efforts.

Public Works' Highways Division Chief Brian Hashiro said his workers pick up seaweed once a week from the Alaaloa condominium, and pickups are on an "as needed" basis elsewhere.

He said the seaweed is taken to the landfill for disposal, and he doesn't have records on the amounts picked up.

Jencks said his department's policy is that seaweed will be picked up without charge if condominium operators stuff it into disposal bags and get them out to the street.

The director said he can't get county employees down to the beaches to "spend hours and hours of taxpayers' money to pick this stuff up."

As for Kahului Harbor, Jencks said he wants to send workers to get as much seaweed off the rocks and beach as possible, but the state's widening of Kahului Beach Road has stalled that project.

"We've been hampered in our efforts to get down there," he said.

Bob Siorot, Maui District engineer for the state Department of Transportation's Highways Division, said that's news to him.

"If the county needs to get to the ocean, we will work with the contractor to accommodate the county," he said.

In 1993, Wendy Wiltse, a marine ecologist with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency on loan to the state Department of Health, came to Maui to develop a West Maui watershed management plan for reducing sediments and nutrients feeding the algae growths.

She said scientists are getting close to nailing down the cause of the seaweed growths, but all research results are not in yet.

It appears the offshore algae is fertilized by nitrates coming from naturally occurring runoff of watershed areas as well as fertilizers coming from sugar cane and pineapple fields, golf courses, resort landscaping and homeowners' lawns, she said.

Pioneer Mill and Maui Pineapple Co. have reduced



The Maui News / MATTHEW THAYER photo

Wally Working, a Aiealoa condominium resident and board member, looks out on the bay by the property which until recent years was free of sea-

weed. Heavy growths now dump tons of rotting algae on the beach, clog the water and interfere with the natural ebb and flow of sand.

Jencks says the county doesn't have the equipment or the jurisdiction to attempt seaweed cleanups in the water. Aside from that, it's "very expensive," and, with wave surge action, it's potentially dangerous to county employees, he says.

Working calls it a "hell of a job" but "doable." "What are we going to do? Study this to death? In the meantime, nothing gets done," he says.

Wiltse says a water-based removal of seaweed also poses some environmental risks such as clearing away beneficial marine life.

But, with tons of seaweed coming back at a "phenomenal rate" in some areas such as Aiealoa, "it may well be that just cleaning the beaches isn't enough," she said.

Wiltse's prognosis isn't good for a near-term solution to the seaweed problem.

"I think we're going to be stuck with this algae cleanup problem for some time in the future," she said.

their use of fertilizers over the past five to 10 years to cut costs, Wiltse said.

But others haven't taken the same steps to better control fertilizer uses, she said. "We can do a much better job there."

Also, water conservation and wastewater re-use would reduce the amount of nitrates getting into the ocean, she said.

The Hoyochi Nikko's Lando-Brown is convinced that piling the seaweed out of the water before it hits shore is a solution because that would prevent the pest from re-seeding itself.

"No one does any prevention as it's growing," he says.

Working agrees. A submersible pump, similar to those used for underwater archaeological projects, could be used to pull out the seaweed. Another option could be to use a small barge with a wench and a raking system to get rid of the algae, he says.

Letters

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Seaweed must be controlled

Mahalo to Brian Perry for the seaweed article (Aug. 20). I feel Brian did an excellent job showing the problem, the frustration and the private money being dumped into the bottomless pit of algae cleanup. The closing prognosis as stated by Wendy Wiltse, "I think we're going to be stuck with this algae cleanup problem for some time in the future," is not a prognosis with which I'm willing to settle.

If we've got the money to create the problem, then we must come up with the money to correct the problem. Our system of government allows our society to pay for its needs by special use taxes. Our roads, schools and numerous other services are provided in that way.

If we insist on dumping nitrates into the ocean by means of fertilizers and sewage injection pumps, then it's time we placed a special use tax on the chemicals and levy a tax on each gallon of sewage. When we quit using outhouses, not everyone felt they could afford indoor plumbing. When we start dumping pollutants into the ocean, we need to belly up to the bar and pay the tab.

I also find it interesting that an alarming number of our sea turtles now have tumors growing on them. Are we so naive to think that our algae problem is not related to the sea turtle tumors? I doubt that algae creates tumors, but the nitrates altering our ocean environment are undoubtedly affecting a broad base of our delicate system.

The county seems to think in terms of dollars and cents (not sense). What will happen to our local economy when tourists start electing to go to other paradise islands that have clear water and don't have the stench drifting across their dining tables?

Ron Lando-Brown
Lahaina

Put seaweed to use

Thank you for your excellent story on the seaweed plaguing our beaches (Aug. 20). Fast growing hypnea algae will make our blue Hawaiian waters look like mud and smell like worse if we ignore the problem. We should recycle seaweed like any other waste and attempt to stop the problem from spreading while we still can, as beaches across Maui are already infested.

The county contends there isn't enough money around to properly clean up the seaweed, yet my proposals for seaweed cleanups have been rejected by the Lingle administration even when funds have been approved by the County Council.

Last year, I proposed an economic use for seaweed, composting, so that it would become an asset instead of a burden to the taxpayers. The County Council expressed strong interest in my idea, and sent a letter indicating it would fund my project. Project funding was ultimately denied by the Lingle administration. I performed the work regardless, with excellent results, with help from Campaign Recycle Maui and the Maui Recycling Service.

I also approached the state with a proposal for an ocean-based cleanup to examine the feasibility of ocean harvesting of algae, but it too was rejected.

Anyone with any experience knows that bagging seaweed onshore and trucking it to the county landfill is ridiculous. The county subsidizes recycling to the tune of over a million dollars annually; surely it can spend some of our money to help turn nuisance seaweed into a useful agricultural product, while saving our ocean water's and beaches' pristine reputation in the process.

Mark Merritte
Lahaina

Maui out to make money



Edwin Tanji/The Honolulu Advertiser
Joe Estrella clears rotting seaweed from the shore at the Kihei Beach Reserve, hoping to turn the nuisance into a business.

By Edwin Tanji
Advertiser Maui County Bureau

Of all islands, Maui is having the worst problem with smelly seaweed rotting on its beaches.

So the state Department of Health is trying to start a business to find a viable commercial use for the seaweed, said state environmental planner June Harrigan.

There have been persistent complaints about seaweed accumulating on the shorelines in West Maui, Kihei and Kahului. The most common species creating the nuisance is *Hypnea musciformis*, a red algae introduced in Hawaii about 15 years ago.

An endemic green algae, *Ulva fasciata*, also blooms in shoreline areas and creates severe odor problems when the material

from seaweed

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accumulates and begins to rot.

Both *Hypnea* and *Ulva* are believed to bloom when high levels of nutrients, such as nitrogen and phosphorus, are in the ocean.

The Department of Health has been doing studies on what may be causing the algae blooms, but has no concrete results so far. Maui County has programs to clean the beaches of the seaweed, but the material now is just dumped in the county's landfill.

The environmental planning office is seeking proposals for "a realistic and reasonable business plan" that would pick up the seaweed and turn it into a commercial product.

The state is offering a \$75,000 grant to start up the project,

although the business must be able to support itself after the initial grant is used, Harrigan said.

"It would be a waste of money to have a project close up and stop when the funds run out," she said.

The new effort seeks to turn the nuisance into a business. There have been suggestions that algae could be used to make compost or other marketable products.

Information on the program is available from Harrigan, manager of the Department of Health environmental planning office, 919 Ala Moana Blvd., Third Floor, Honolulu 96814; or by calling (808) 586-4337. The deadline for submitting proposals is May 24.

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