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U.S. Census

Database

Corrections

Orange goo baffles remote Alaska village

By MARK THIESSEN
Associated Press

ANCHORAGE, Alaska (AP) -- Leona Baldwin's husband saw it first, and she got on the marine radio to alert others in the remote Alaska village of Kivalina that a strange orange goo was sitting on top of the town's harbor.

The news attracted all the townspeople, anxious to get a gander of the phenomenon that covered much of the harbor and then began washing ashore Wednesday.

The next day it rained, and residents found the orange matter floating on top of the rain buckets they use to collect drinking water. It was also found on one roof, leading them to believe whatever it was, it was airborne, too.

By Friday, the orange substance in the lagoon had dissipated or washed out to sea, and what was left on ground had dried to a powdery substance.

Samples of the orange matter were collected in canning jars and sent to a lab in Anchorage for analysis.

Until results are known, Kivalina's 374 residents will likely continue to wonder just what exactly happened in their village.

"Certainly at this point it's a mystery," said Emanuel Hignutt, a chemist with the state Department of Environmental Conservation lab in Anchorage.



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Kivalina, an Inupiat Eskimo village, is located at the tip of an 8-mile barrier reef on Alaska's northwest coast, and is located between the Chukchi Sea and Kivalina River to the north and the Wulik River to the south.

Villagers have never seen anything like this before, and elders have never heard any stories passed down from earlier generations about an orange-colored substance coming into town.

"This is the first for Kivalina, as far as I know," said 63-year-old Austin Swan, a city council member.

Portions of the samples will also be sent to the University of Alaska Fairbanks and to a National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration lab in South Carolina for testing.

"There's a number of experts in the areas who can identify if it's an organic material, for example, and what species this is, or perhaps it's not an organic material, and we're going to determine that, as well," Hignutt said.

The Coast Guard already has ruled out that the orange material, which some people described as having a semi-solid feel to it, was man-made or a petroleum product.

That leaves algae as the best guess, said village administrator Janet Mitchell.

The concern is if it's somehow harmful. What will it do to fish, which villagers will soon start catching to stock up for winter, or the caribou currently being hunted, or the berries?

"We rely 100 percent on subsistence," she said.

Swan helped collect some samples for testing, and waded out into the lagoon. He grabbed some of the substance in his gloved hand.

"It was really light, a powdery look to it, and it was just floating on there, all bunched up together," he said. "It looked like it could blow away very easily."

He said some of the material had a sheen to it, like it was oil.

"But I couldn't feel the oil at all, any texture at all."

When the material bunched up in the lagoon, it created 10 foot-by-100 foot swaths of glimmering orange.

"When the wind came in, it narrowed them to a few feet wide. The color was a bright neon orange," said Frances Douglas, a member of the city council.

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"It pretty much covered the south end of the lagoon in streaks," she said of the attraction, which drew many residents.

"Pretty much, everybody was baffled," she said.

City personnel went to a pump house two miles away on the Wulik River, and found the material there, too. The village is also about 40 miles from the Red Dog zinc mine, but officials there assured the village the substance didn't come from them.

Since the substance was unknown, city officials cautioned residents to keep children away from the orange goo and for residents to boil their water before drinking it.

But Mitchell said water is another concern since they don't have much reserve in the city's two water tanks.

The tanks need to be filled this summer from the Wulik River to make it through the winter, but the city had to stop pumping last month before the goo showed up because of rain disturbances. And they may not be able to resume pumping until they find out what the substance is.

"Right now, we're going to have to go on water conservation, use it for consumption and try not to use it for washing," she said. "That's going to be difficult."

Kivalina wasn't alone in reporting the strange orange substance last Wednesday.

Shannon Melton said she was boating on the Buckland River about 150 miles southeast of Kivalina, and the river was not its normal color. "It was orange looking," she said.

She took the boat out again on Thursday to go berry picking, and said the river had returned to its normal color, but some of the creeks off the river still had the orange tinge to them.

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