

Invasive Species Unleashed by Baronof Island Storm Damage

Ed Ronco, KCAW - Sitka | November 17, 2011 - 5:03 pm

The storm that hit Baronof Island ripped up a former fish farm and unleashed an invasive species. The Fish and Game Department says it hopes the pieces of the floating farm in Whiting Harbor have been contained in the harbor area by currents. Invasive species coordinator Tammy Davis says the fish farm had been scheduled for removal last weekend, but then the waves and winds hit.

“High seas and high winds definitely broke apart the farm. Some sections really just getting destroyed as it crashed up on the shoreline, the causeway shoreline,” Davis said

Whiting Harbor, and much of the infrastructure inside it, have been infested with a species of tunicate called D-vex, or *Didemnum vexillum*. It coats anything in its path, destroying habitat and preventing mussels from feeding. The Whiting Harbor outbreak is the first time D-vex has been discovered in Alaska. But other states, including Washington and Oregon, have spent thousands of dollars to prevent its spread.

The storm’s damage to the farm definitely has caused problems, but Davis says because the winds were out of the west, the structure stayed in the harbor system.

“That is the silver lining indeed. The direction of the wind was the lucky, lucky piece in this story. Instead of things moving out of the harbor, they were moving into the causeway,” Davis said.

Things didn’t go quite as well at the end of October, Davis says, when a piece of farm escaped the harbor and crashed on some nearby rocks. Most of it has been recovered, but that some small floating pieces might have washed up elsewhere.

She urged members of the public to be on the lookout for buoyant debris that might have come from the farm at Whiting Harbor.

“Especially if the debris has any sort of yellow orangey-white growth on it that might be the tunicate,” Davis said.

Anyone who suspects they’ve seen the invasive tunicate is asked to report it at the state’s hotline, 877-INVASIV.

The cleanup of Whiting Harbor is expected to continue through the week. Davis says she’s thankful for all the assistance so far, especially from the U.S. Coast Guard, various government agencies, and even local concerned citizens.