

Invasive Sea Squirt Subject of Sitka Meeting

SITKA, ALASKA (2010-11-05) State officials say an invasive species of sea squirt has been found in Sitka's Whiting Harbor. The small invertebrate is called a "tunicate." It was discovered for the first time in Alaska when volunteers and scientists conducted a "BioBlitz" in Sitka last June. Test results came back in August confirming the tunicates as a species not native to Sitka Sound. A public meeting Monday night at 6:30 at Harrigan Centennial Hall aims to explain how serious the threat is, and why Sitkans should be paying attention.

The invasive tunicate, is properly known as *Didemnum vexillum*, or "D. vex" for short. It sort of resembles something out of a science fiction movie.

"It's similar to 'The Blob' in that it's just going to spread over anything that it can," said Tammy Davis, invasive species program project leader for the Alaska Department of Fish & Game. "We've seen it growing on seaweed, we've seen it growing on kelp and rocks, and shellfish."

And when it covers those things, like clams and mussels, they can't open up and feed.

"The other concern is that by carpeting the sea floor, and by carpeting seaweed, we're concerned that any fish that rely on seaweed, eelgrass, for some part of their life cycle, would be impacted," she said.

And that could have an impact on commercial and traditional resources found in the sound, such as fish, herring roe and kelp. It also grows on rocks, pilings, rip-rap, nets, boat hulls... just about anything it can.

ADF&G is asking the public to help out by reporting sightings of the tunicates to its invasive species hotline, 1-877-INVASIVE. Take a picture if you can, and note the GPS coordinates of the tunicate.

Davis said members of the public should not try to remove the tunicate. One reason is that it's easily confused with native species that are supposed to be here.

"The other reason is that because it is such a successful reproducer, should you leave behind a fragment, or it fragments while you're trying to take that, it could break apart and now you've got spread instead of control," Davis said.

D. vex has been found in Washington and British Columbia for a few years. The state of Washington dropped \$850,000 to manage the problem in Puget Sound.

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