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State Official Applauds Response to Massive Fish Die-Off in Redondo

Patch looks back at the planning, volunteers and manpower credited in cleanup.

By [Ed Pilolla \(/users/ed-pilolla\)](#) | [Email the author \(#\)](#) | 6:00am

Andrew Hughan, the public information officer for the state's Department of Fish and Game, has seen plenty of responses to natural disasters during his three decades on the job, he said. But [the recent sardine die-off \(http://hermosabeach.patch.com/articles/portion-of-king-harbor-closed\)](#) next door in Redondo Beach's King Harbor Marina was different.

"In 28 years of disaster management, Redondo Beach was the best prepared municipality that I have ever seen," Hughan said by phone Wednesday.

He also credited the local volunteers who helped avert what might have been a disastrous situation when about 175 tons of sardines died unexpectedly in the Marina on March 8.

The [\\$300,000 cleanup effort \(http://hermosabeach.patch.com/articles/redondos-king-harbor-fish-cleanup-finished\)](#) involved 700 volunteers, with 60 to 100 deployed at any time, some of whom were Hermosa Beach residents.

The cleanup also involved 200 nets, 24 wheelbarrows and 125 buckets, as well as trucks and front loaders, said Redondo Beach Public Works Director Mike Witzansky.

"The mantra was 'hands with nets,'" Witzansky said. "That was really our most effective method from start to finish."

"As we got more and more creative, we deployed different pieces of equipment like we never had before," Witzansky said. "We had air compressors bubbling up fish from the ground. We were using fire boat hoses trying to move things around. We were using skiff boats to create reverse currents to contain these things."

The most important piece of equipment was the Vactor Vacuum trucks, which sucked up the fish, Witzansky said. And officials credited neighboring cities for providing equipment and personnel during the cleanup, including Hermosa Beach.

Redondo Beach officials also followed a multi-function hazard plan that includes protocols for various types of disasters to address the cleanup.

"If it hadn't been for that, we wouldn't have had the results we have had," said Redondo Beach Fire Chief Dan Madrigal said, adding that the public information outreach led by police Sgt. Phil Keenan was very effective.

Pete Carmichael, Redondo Beach's newly hired harbor business and transit director, learned a lot about emergency response in a short amount of time, he said.

"A hundred and seventy-five tons of dead fish my 13th day on the job, and then a tsunami on the 15th day," said Carmichael, who contacted Marinas up and down the coast for ideas on what methods would work best for clearing out the sardines.

"Pretty quickly our options narrowed to an underwater dive operation, where they use a low-flow vacuum hose and a curtain boom response, much like you would see in an oil spill," he said, adding that three contractors were able to be on site within 24 hours.

Work was delayed because of [water surges in the Harbor \(http://hermosabeach.patch.com/articles/redondos-sardine-cleanup-suspended-due-to-surging-water\)](http://hermosabeach.patch.com/articles/redondos-sardine-cleanup-suspended-due-to-surging-water) as a result of the tsunami from Japan. Redondo Beach Mayor Mike Gin was tracking information about the surging water making its way from Japan at 2 a.m. on his laptop, officials said.

It was the right decision not to deploy local volunteers while 15-mph water currents were rocking the docks in the harbor, said Redondo Beach Police Chief Joe Leonardi.

City officials said 175 tons of sardines were hauled away, although Dave Caron, a USC professor of biology studying water quality in the Harbor, said 140 tons were taken away, by his count.

Either way, the majority of the fish were removed before the decaying process advanced to make the removal especially difficult, officials said.

“Getting the fish out of the Harbor, I think, was the best thing that could be done for two reasons,” Caron said. “One, all that decomposition would have put a tremendous burden [on replenishing] the oxygen ... in the water. The other problem is that the decomposition of all that fish material is going to release nutrients into the water that could very well give you an algal bloom in the water, which you don’t want.”

Along with the volunteers and public employees, officials also credited Redondo Beach's waste collection provider, Athens Services, for its work and Redondo Beach City Manager Bill Workman for his leadership.

“It’s been suggested that somehow we angered King Neptune and somehow he delivered to our doorstep 175 tons of sardines and a tsunami,” Workman said. “Well, let me say that, yes, we have met the test.”