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Residents, fish farm seek source of scummy substance in bay

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White material has been washing ashore in Jordan Bay, Shelburne County.

SHELBURNE — Goopy off-white sea scum has been washing up on the shoreline of Jordan Bay, and residents want to know where it comes from.

Is it harmful to people, the environment, shore birds or sea creatures?

Some have an idea its tied to open-pen salmon farms a couple of kilometres away. Two Jordan Bay salmon farming sites operated by Cooke Aquaculture Inc. received government approval in 2012.

Residents first saw the mystery scum around the end of July and have seen it many times since.

The rougher the weather, the more of it washes up on shore.

It has left “a permanent white bathtub ring in the tidal pools here,” said local resident Cindy Horncastle, who took several photos of the substance.

It’s been coming ashore on mainland beaches, north of the McLean Island and Gull Rock areas of Shelburne County.

“It’s not foam. It’s actually something that you can scoop up with a spoon,” Horncastle said Monday.

She took samples and placed them in a jar of water. She said the substance congealed into a mass and sank to the bottom.

A few residents decided to send samples to a laboratory in New Brunswick.

“It’s mineral oil,” Horncastle said. “We’ve never seen it before.”

She said it is known that mineral oil can be used in the aquaculture industry as a stabilizer in vaccines, or in pesticides and algaecides.

Perhaps, but it was not used in Jordan Bay by fish farmers, a spokeswoman for Cooke Aquaculture said Monday.

“We’ve asked the Department of Fisheries and Aquaculture to do some testing as well because if, in fact, there is mineral oil there, it’s certainly not coming from our farm,” said Nell Halse, vice-president of communications with the company.

“We are equally concerned about determining what this substance is as we don’t want it to impact our operations.”

Halse said she checked with a scientist who thought the substance might be salt.

“If the company says we have no idea, what is the government doing?” Horncastle said.

“This is a lobster fishing bay. It’s a lobster nursery. So what is the source? Is it harmful? We sent the photos to the government.”

The community has asked the province to investigate.

Fisheries and Aquaculture Minister Keith Colwell responded to a letter from Horncastle, saying his department is collecting samples for potential analysis.

Department spokeswoman Krista Higdon said Monday that an insufficient amount of the substance was available to analyze when an inspector visited the site, but one will return to collect a sample if more goo washes up.

Colwell said in his letter that a community liaison committee composed of community and industry members is the best way to address such issues.

But it would have no authority to act, Horncastle said.

Residents should be able to contact their elected representatives directly, she said.

“Our main goal is just to let the public know what’s happening.”

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