

Notification and Investigation Details

On Tuesday, December 10, 2019, at 15:30, Scott Fowler, the Environmental Manager for the City of Valdosta (ph. 229-251-6528), contacted the Waycross Fisheries Office to report some dead fish in the Withlacoochee River near Valdosta, GA. The call was forwarded to Donald Harrison (Fisheries Biologist III). Mr. Fowler informed Mr. Harrison that Edward Strohl (Valdosta City worker) had seen some dead fish (approximately 20-25 bass and bream) in the Withlacoochee River at the GA Hwy 133 bridge. Mr. Fowler stated that the city had been doing some work at a manhole a good distance away in town but was not sure the dead fish were related or just coincidence. Mr. Fowler also stated that he had contacted EPD staff in Albany and they informed him to notify the Wildlife Resources Division-Fisheries Management Section (WRD-FM) of the dead fish. Mr. Harrison informed him that WRD-FM staff would come take a look that afternoon and try to determine whether the reason for the dead fish.

After speaking with Mr. Fowler, Mr. Harrison contacted Scott Robinson (Operations Manager, WRD-FM) to notify him of a potential fish kill in the Withlacoochee River. Mr. Harrison and Jim Page (Fisheries Biologist III) departed the Waycross Office at 16:00 and travelled to the reported fish kill site at the GA Hwy 133 bridge (Site 11). Mr. Harrison and Mr. Page arrived at the site at approximately 17:40. Upon arrival, Mr. Harrison and Mr. Page found dead fish of several species and sizes that appeared to be 1-2 days old. Both individuals also immediately noticed a pungent odor and evidence that a pulse of water had recently passed through the area. Water quality samples were taken at the site and revealed slightly depressed dissolved oxygen levels (Table 1), but not low enough to kill fish at this time. Both concurred that they did not believe these fish had died from a natural event. Mr. Harrison contacted Mr. Fowler to follow up with some more questions to try and determine potential causes of the fish kill. While discussing the fish kill, Mr. Fowler indicated that the work at the manhole cover in town was related to a sewage spill. A lift station had failed due to a sensor not being reconnected after an update on December 3, 2019, and the failure was not discovered until December 9, 2019. Approximately 7.5 million gallons of sewage spilled into Sugar Creek, which is a tributary to the Withlacoochee River, over the 6 days that the lift station had been offline. Mr. Fowler stated that he and his staff had been monitoring Sugar Creek and had not seen any dead fish, but he contacted EPD as soon as dead fish were observed in the Withlacoochee River. Mr. Harrison informed Mr. Fowler that WRD-FM staff would need to complete an investigation of the kill and sewage spill and would return the next day. Mr. Fowler indicated that he would gladly take staff to the site of the spill and several access points to Sugar Creek. Due to darkness, the field investigation was ceased for the night. At 18:15, Mr. Harrison notified Scott Robinson of the findings and plans to return the next day to complete the investigation.

WRD-FM staff members Don Harrison, Ed Zmarzly (Fisheries Technician III), Jason Mitchell (Fisheries Technician II), and David McGhin (Fisheries Technician I) departed Waycross, GA at 08:00 on Wednesday, Dec. 11 to return to the site of the fish kill. While in route Mr. Harrison notified Mr. Fowler of the estimated time of arrival to the site in order to meet with him. WRD-Staff arrived at Site 11 at 09:35 and Mr. Harrison notified Mr. Fowler via text message that WRD-FM was on site. Mr. Harrison also instructed Mr. Mitchell and Mr. McGhin to proceed downstream of the GA Hwy 133 bridge to enumerate dead fish and determine the lower end of the fish kill. At 10:00, Mr. Fowler indicated he was on way to meet Mr. Harrison and Mr. Zmarzly and would show them the spill site and various access points to Sugar Cr. Mr. Fowler arrived at 10:45 and led WRD-FM staff to where Sugar Creek went under Gornto Rd (Site 5). He then proceeded to take Mr. Harrison to several other sites, including the spill site and lift station before returning to Site 5.

Mr. Harrison and Mr. Zmarzly then proceeded back to the spill site (Site 2) (Photo 1), which was located behind a Home Depot store and upstream of the Bay Tree Rd crossing (Site3). Once at Site 2, Mr.