

Anchovies stink up local beaches

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The pungent, fish-oil smell of anchovies wafted inland last week as predatory mackerel drove schools of the tiny fish onto Midcounty beaches.

The odor of ripe fish permeated Capitola and Soquel

Thursday and Friday nights, carried several miles inland by an onshore breeze.

"On many occasions within the last week or so they're right up on the shore," Dick Menefee, district superintendent of the California Parks and Recreation Department, said.

Salmon, striped bass and mackerel are swimming close behind the dense "bait balls" of anchovies, which form a key part of the aquatic food chain, Menefee said.

The beached fish were quickly picked up by fishermen looking for bait or by scavenging gulls, have created no serious problems, Menefee said.

But, he added, "over in New Brighton for the past couple of days we've had a tremendous fish stench."

If the number of dead fish at New Brighton increases, Parks Department workers may have to chop and bury the carrion under sand, Menefee said.

Mary Jones, booking agent for Wharf Charters in Capitola, said she noticed the anchovies close to shore early Tuesday morning while she was catching live bait at New Brighton

Beach.

The water 700 to 800 feet off shore was literally black with fish. The ocean seemed to boil, she said, as the small fish, driven by mackerel, rippled up to the surface.

Now, said Jones Friday, who lives in Capitola, "when the fog comes in, you can definitely smell an anchovy smell."

Despite such "ocean smells," fishermen are once again enjoying the mackerel madness that comes with anchovy runs.

"We've had a major mackerel run again in the past few days at the Seacliff Pier," Menefee said.

During such runs fishermen repeatedly pull in two or three of the 18- to 24-inch fish to a line, Menefee said.

"There's no skill involved," Menefee said. "All you have to do is have your line in the water and you've got a fish."

Rita Walker, general manager at the Capitola Wharf, said the business is stocking up for the type of mackerel run that last year enabled people to catch as many as 60 fish an hour.

"We're expecting it any day," she said.

So far, the Santa Cruz Small Craft Harbor has managed to avoid the large anchovy kills that last year filled the harbor with thousands of tons of dead fish.

A system of nets continues to keep out the large numbers of fish, which, when they enter, deplete the oxygen in the harbor water and suffocate. Their decaying bodies not only create a stench that drives away tourists but also make the water so acidic it damages boat hulls.

Last year, the decaying fish caused \$500,000 in damage to boats in harbor, Steve Scheiblaue, harbor master, said.

Current weather conditions are helping prevent another large kill, Scheiblaue said.

A tropical weather system is creating the type of surging surf that brings a constant flow of fresh oxygenated water to the harbor, he said.

Large kills typically take place after the water has remained calm for several days, Scheiblaue said.

The surf also ripped the line securing the harbor nets to