

By Frank Carini

Daily News staff

NEWPORT — Some local lobstermen believe a pesticide used to control Rhode Island's mosquito population is finding its way into Narragansett Bay and threatening to destroy their livelihood.

They claim the state's use of methoprene to kill mosquito larvae is hurting the bay's lobster population. Longtime lobstermen such as Patrick Heaney and Lanny Dellinger are afraid the active ingredient in the pesticide, which is sold under the trade name Altosid and is a common ingredient in household flea-bombs, also is killing lobster larvae and inhibiting adult lobsters from molting.

"We're seeing a lot more lobsters with physical problems," said Heaney, a 45-year-old lobsterman/fisherman who has been fishing out of Newport for about 16 years after a career start in New York and a stop in Alaska. "These pesticides have to be a major contributing factor."

Scientific data, however, doesn't back that claim. In fact, the scientific community has reached no consensus about the impact Altosid might have on marine life and lobsters in general.

A 2007 study done in New York claims methoprene, used as a means to kill mosquito larvae, has no "significant adverse ecological impacts." A 2005 study published in the journal Integrative and Comparative Biology claims methoprene interrupts lobster molting, which can cause shell disease.

This lack of scientific agreement alarms local lobstermen.

"We're using this stuff before we know what kind of impact it's having and what impact it will have 15 years down the road," said Dellinger, who is president of the Rhode Island Lobstermen's Association. "Lobster larvae are exposed to this (expletive) for weeks. What happens when these pesticides sink to the bottom? Do they become more deadly? Do they keep killing?"

Matt Auten is an advocate with Environment Rhode Island, a statewide, citizen-based environmental agency. He believes Dellinger's questions and many others should have been answered before dumping pesticides into catch basins that empty into Narragansett Bay and its estuaries began.

"The burden of proof should be flipped around," Auten said. "We shouldn't be using these pesticides until it's determined they're safe."

Alan D. Gettman, the state Department of Environmental Management's mosquito abatement coordinator since 1992, believes both pesticides the state uses to kill mosquito larvae are environmentally safe. There is no evidence that suggests methoprene pellets placed in catch basins have any impact on lobsters, he said. The pellets sink to the bottom of catch basins and seldom — if ever — make their way down the outfall pipe, he said, and only a miniscule amount of methoprene even makes it into the bay.

"The dilution factor is overwhelming," Gettman said. "Even in our own experiments that were designed to stack the deck against us only a few samples had enough methoprene to be detected. There's no evidence emerging that points the finger of blame at this product."

Local lobstermen, however, would like the state to hold off on placing larvacide pellets into catch basins until further studies are conducted and more research is gathered.

"We need to stop dumping this stuff down catch basins until science definitely says this poison is not a problem to the environment," said Newport-based lobsterman/fisherman Dennis Ingram, who is a board member of the Ocean State Fishermen's Association. "You add UV (ultraviolet) light to a mix of pesticides, chlorine and lawn fertilizer that is in bay, shake it up, and you have a toxic cocktail. Nobody knows the impact."

The state began using Altosid in 2000 to combat a newly emerging public-health threat, the West Nile virus. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency says methoprene "can be very highly acutely toxic to estuarine and marine invertebrates." The agency also says methoprene degrades rapidly in sunlight.

Municipalities typically start placing the pesticide, which DEM distributes, in June. Most of the 120,000- 150,000 catch basins in the state are treated

with a half-teaspoonful of Altosid once a month from June through September, costing the state about \$75,000 a year.

The state places another larvacide called Mosquito Dunks in aboveground mosquito habitats such as retention and detention ponds, wetlands and roadside ditches. Both the Mosquito Dunks and Altosid are available to the public. Both, Gettman said, are the most benign products of their kind on the market.

Local lobstermen, however, find little comfort in that fact. They note the growing rate of shell disease in Narragansett Bay lobsters and point to a lawsuit settled two years ago that favored New York and Connecticut lobstermen.

Long Island Sound lobstermen filed lawsuits in U.S. District Court in 2000 that targeted the manufacturers of chemicals that were sprayed in the New York metropolitan area to kill mosquitoes. They claimed the active ingredient in the pesticide that was used in 1999 – malathion – is highly toxic to lobsters and may have contributed to a devastating lobster die-off in the waters between Connecticut and Long Island.

The three lawsuits were settled by 2006, with the chemical companies agreeing to pay Long Island Sound lobstermen a total of \$16.25 million. The largest chemical manufacturer named in the lawsuits made no admission of liability, and malathion was never named as the clear culprit.

Local lobstermen also point to the fact that Maine – whose lobster industry was valued at about \$250 million last year and often is cited as a model fishery – doesn't allow the coastal use of Altosid.

"The pesticides used for mosquito control are designed to kill bugs, and lobsters are bugs, or more specifically, arthropods," according to the Maine Environmental Policy Institute. "They share many life characteristics and a common evolutionary history with insects. They both have chitinous external skeletons and develop and grow from larvae through a series of molts."

Kathleen Castro, of the University of Rhode Island-based Rhode Island Sea Grant program, understands the concerns of local lobstermen. She also understands DEM's mission to protect the public from the West Nile virus – 10 confirmed cases since 2000 – and the rarer but more deadly Triple-E – the last confirmed Rhode Island case was in West Warwick in 1998.

"(Methoprene) does have an impact; it's designed to kill insects and lobsters are a close relative," Castro said. "But it's also a public safety issue, which makes it a difficult situation."

Frank Carini is The Daily News city editor. Send him e-mail at CityDesk@NewportRI.com.