

Environment Agency rules out chemical pollution as likely cause of Teesside crab deaths

- The Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science (Cefas) continues to analyse samples for signs of disease
- Undersea cabling, seismic survey activity or dredging have also been ruled out as possible causes

The investigation into the deaths of thousands of crabs and lobsters along the North East coast has ruled out chemical pollution as a likely cause.

The Environment Agency, the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science (Cefas), North Eastern Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authority (NEIFCA), the Marine Management Organisation (MMO), Food Standards Agency, UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) and local authorities are collaborating on the investigation, which is trying to establish what could have caused the crabs and lobsters to die off the coast between Hartlepool and Robin Hoods Bay.

Investigators have previously ruled out sewage, undersea cabling, seismic survey activity or dredging as likely causes.

Sarah Jennings, Operations Manager from the Environment Agency, said:

“We understand how distressing this incident is for the local shellfish industry and for members of the public, so this investigation has been a top priority for Environment Agency and Cefas laboratories.

“We’ve used both traditional and innovative screening methods to analyse samples of water, sediment and crab looking for traces of contamination. We’ve screened for over 1,000 potential chemical contaminants but found no anomalies that could lead to an event of this scale.

“Our environment officers have also reviewed environmental permits and scrutinised industrial sites in the Teesside area, but again found no evidence of abnormal discharges that could lead to an event of this scale.

“In a bid to better understand the scale of the incident, our survey vessel the Humber Guardian has taken samples from the seabed, which show that only crabs and lobsters appear to be affected.

“By combining this evidence we have ruled out chemical pollution and sewage as likely causes, and the investigation will now focus more on whether disease or a natural event could have been responsible for the deaths.”

Mike Gubbins, head of the Fish Health Inspectorate at Cefas, said:

“We are continuing to investigate whether an aquatic animal disease has caused this mortality.

“Our Fish Health Inspectorate have been analysing shellfish samples collected from the area for listed and other non-listed diseases, but none have been detected so far.

“We will continue to work with partner agencies to try and find answers for the local community.”

Anyone who finds dead crustaceans (crabs or lobsters) or other dead wildlife, should report them to the Environment Agency on 0800 80 70 60.