Freeze-killed fish sales net some arrests

By STEVE CULPEPPER
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The Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries is arresting people for selling fish killed by last weekend's freezing weather.

Department Secretary Virginia Van Sickle said the problem is not widespread but that "several good cases" have been made against people for scooping up freeze-killed fish and selling them.

Wildlife officials have pinpointed only scattered areas of fish kills, but in the affected areas the numbers of dead fish are staggering.

In some dead-end canals where fish went to avoid the cold and ended up freezing, dead fish "are checkablock up and down the canal," said Jerry Clark, assistant secretary for the Office of Fisheries.

"Some trucks will go down to the canal or bayou and send people down there to throw fish up into the trucks," he said.

The actual violation comes in taking more fish than limits allow.

Species most affected by the cold were redfish, mullet and speckled trout, Van Sickle said.

"Word is out we're enforcing bag limits, so the problem is not as widespread as if we hadn't gone out and started arresting people immediately," she said.

While the cold weather killed good numbers of fish here and there, Clark said the state's wildlife population mostly "dodged the bullet," and survived the single-digit cold.

Wildlife employees did count nearly 50 dead brown pelicans.

Richard Martin of the department's Natural Heritage division said most of the dead pelicans were juvenile birds.

"The vast majority of juvenile pelicans die the first year," he said. "It takes them a long time to learn to feed themselves. So a lot were under stress already from poor nutrition."

"My first impression from flying around is that the cold wasn't that great a problem for wildlife," Martin said.

Herb Bell, assistant manager of the Sabine National Wildlife Refuge in Cameron Parish, said there was a moderate fish kill there.

"Of course we lost some alligators, too. We don't have a handle on the amount. What we've seen over the area -- we did have one of our commercial trappers who also is a worker with the state to collect the animals that have been killed and he was able to pick up over a 12-15 mile area, 14 alligators."

A Wildlife and Fisheries report on the Rockefeller Wildlife Refuge says that "During the freeze, alligators were observed with their noses pushed through the ice and frozen in that position for as long as four days."

The report noted that "considerable mortality" will be found among the alligator population over the next few weeks.

"The long-term effects of the freeze on alligator populations statewide will continue to be evaluated and the final results may take years to assess. Aerial nest count surveys will be conducted in July and a number of night counts will be conducted throughout alligator habitat statewide," according to the report.

Bobby Brown, manager of the Lacassine Wildlife Refuge, said personnel shortages have prevented him from evaluating the freeze's effects on the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service refuge.

"I would suspect alligators and nutria were killed," he said.

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Game Preserve, fish kills measured between 35 tons and 175 tons, according to manager Jack Meeder.

“We had massive fish kills in mullet, alligator gar, pogies or menhaden, and quite a few larger redfish,” Meeder said.

A number of shorebirds died when the heavy north wind blew water out of the shallow coastal lakes and their feeding areas froze, he said.

“I don’t think it’s anything that the wildlife won’t recover from,” he said. “It’s liable to effect next year’s menhaden. Probably the biggest impact will be on menhaden and redfish.”

Van Sickle said some of the effect on fish “won’t be visible until next year, when they spawn.”

She said the damage to the declining redfish population is disappointing.

“They had been doing so well. We are all kind of sick about it.”

Clark said that if he had to make a decision now on whether to lower the redfish limits from five 16-inch minimum fish per day he would say no.

“But that doesn’t mean I wouldn’t change my mind a week from now,” he said.

Wildlife officials are still assessing the damage caused by the freeze. Clark said that some dead fish are frozen and may not float to the surface until next week.

Van Sickle said she will wait another week or so before submitting her final report on the freeze to Gov. Buddy Roemer.