Toxic soup washed into Bay puts seafood and jobs at risk

SEA OF DESPAIR

FLOOD debris, contamination and silt in Moreton Bay and the lower Brisbane River could destroy livelihoods and hit seafood supplies, experts warn.

Toxins and pollutants were causing significant damage to the Bay’s fragile ecosystem, with the problem expected to worsen if the region was hit by more storms.

“The (flood) plume is huge...the system has been basically ripped apart by the amount of floodwater,” University of Queensland estuarine biology expert Associate Professor Greg Skilleter said. “I would be very cautious about eating any fish caught from about North Stradbroke south.”

Prof Skilleter said every storm flushed more sediment down the Brisbane River, Cabbage Tree Creek and the Pine River into the Bay. As the sediment settled there was a chance of marine life on the seabed being smothered, he said.

Also of concern was the erosion of “huge swaths of mangroves” vital as fish nurseries.

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A TOXIC cocktail spreading across Moreton Bay is threatening the local seafood industry and causing extensive damage to the rich marine environment that could take up to two years to repair.

Ulcerated fish with acid sulphate burns are being caught as far away as the Jumpinpin Bar between North and South Stradbroke islands after trying to escape the pesticide and heavy metal-saturated blanket of sediment that is the Brisbane River’s flood plume.

University of Queensland estuarine biology expert, Associate Professor Greg Skilleter, said it could take “18 months to two years” for the bay to recover, based on studies of cyclone after-effects. “Because of the massive amount of rainfall, it’s not just water flushing down the river itself. All the stormwater which has gone through the industrial and urban areas carries a lot of lead, zinc and hydrocarbons,” he said.

“And if you start to get a lot of scouring of the riverbed, exposing acid sulphate soils, that too washes into the bay.”

The Queensland Seafood Industry Association warned the contamination could destroy livelihoods and impact on local seafood supplies.

President Michael Gardner said although some trawler crews and commercial fishers had been able to continue operating despite a voluntary ban on fishing across silted-up sections of the bay, smaller operators who relied on prawn stocks in the lower reaches of the river were doing it tough.

“They will be the ones that suffer the most and it’s a pretty severe impact,” he said. “The prawns are going to take a while to recover in the Brisbane River and everything has an impact – the biggest impact is on the individuals who rely on it for a living.”

Mr Gardner said a “large proportion” of locally consumed prawn and crab stocks came from the fishing ground but it was yet to have an impact on prices.

The manager of UQ’s Moreton Bay Research Station at Dunwich, Dr Kathy Townsend, said Moreton Bay was conditioned to recover from major freshwater inflows but much would depend on whether more deluges would follow.

Moreton Bay dugongs depend on seagrass beds around the southern Moreton Island area, extending into the 300 islands area of the southern bay.

“There are many hundreds of different species of fish and uncountable numbers of invertebrates, a lot of which have not been named yet,” she said. “The biggest concern is how the flood plume will impact on the bottom of the food chain.”

Dr Townsend said flooding had already eroded huge swathes of mangroves.

Climate Change and Sustainability Minister Kate Jones said “flood plumes will affect seagrass beds, corals, and other sensitive marine habitats including important wetlands and marine parks with high conservation values”. 