

# The South Branch fish deaths leave DNR waiting for answers

## Up to 1,000 suckers dead

From Staff Reports

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ROMNEY - Federal laboratory reports that may indicate why hundreds of suckers have died in the South Branch of the Potomac River are being awaited by the West Virginia Division of Natural Resources, a fishery biologist said Tuesday.

"We have seen hundreds, maybe up to a thousand, golden redbreast suckers die in the river," said Jim Hedrick, district fishery biologist. "We have reports from people that they began seeing them as early as two weekends ago. Many of the fish have open sores."

A crew from the Leetown Science Center, operated by the U.S. Geological Survey, traveled to the South Branch late last week and collected fish and took them to the Eastern Panhandle facility for testing.

"They actually need fish that are in the process of dying for the results to be meaningful," Hedrick said. "Right now we are waiting to see what the results are."

Hedrick said there were also some other dead fish, including northern hog suckers, a few rock bass and two smallmouth bass.

Dead suckers have been reported as far upstream as Petersburg, with heavier concentrations downstream in the popular recreational river.

"The dead fish increase in the Moorefield area and even more so as you go downstream to The Trough, Hanging Rock, Blue Beach and Milleson's Mill," Hedrick said. "Because the fish float, it is difficult to determine where they actually died."

The biologist said that should other species, especially smallmouth bass, begin to die, additional sampling will take place as quickly as possible.

"Right now we have no evidence to point to the reason for the problem, whether it is environmental or associated with spawning," he said. "We have had suckers die in previous years from spawning distress. This is a situation we want to stay on top of."