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Mystery Bites Plague Paddlers

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Something is stinging paddlers in Ke'ehi Lagoon.

Paddlers describe it as being "stung" or "bitten" while state health experts believe it may be rubbing or irritation. No one knows for sure, but paddlers say they're suffering.

Back in February, paddlers from Manu O Ke Kai Canoe Club got stung during races at Ke'ehi Lagoon.

"[We were] getting these little bumps around our areas where we had our rash guards or board shorts on and then it got really itchy," recalled Jerry Saiz. "It would intensify for about two days and then it would slowly disappear over the course of three days. It just looked like a little red dot, like a mosquito bite, but smaller. Lots of them, all over the place."

The paddlers got stung not while paddling, but while immersed in the water acting as "boat-holders" to keep the boats in position before each race.

Randy Sanborn, president of Manu O Ke Kai, landed in the hospital after holding canoes during a race in February.

"We were getting bites and it happened, I got a bite on my leg below my ankle," Sanborn said. "Two days later, it became an open wound and I scratched it and it got infected."

When the racing season started up again two weeks ago, the problem resurfaced.

Luana Froiseth of the Waikiki Surf Club got multiple bites last weekend.

"The fellow with me, he was getting bitten," Froiseth said. "The two from Hui Nalu, the two from Outrigger, the sides of us, they were getting bitten too and it was just unbearable."

Five days later, Froiseth's rash is still visible, covering the area under her T-shirt and shorts.

"There was a lot of swelling and bleeding," Froiseth said. "That has gone down but it's just red all over the place. It's still itchy."

Froiseth said she saw what was stinging her. She described it as tiny, oblong, brown and spongy. But other paddlers said they can't put their finger on the culprit.

"You can feel it biting and you look down and there's nothing," Sanborn said. "It must be something that's really small, microscopic. What it is, I have no idea."

State health experts aren't sure either, but they do have a theory. They said recent work to clear mangroves along the lagoon may have stirred up sediment that containing the remains of sea sponges. These remains could be causing the skin irritation.

The mystery persists, but some paddlers said it won't keep them out of the lagoon.

"If they have the race, we'll race," Saiz said. "If they need boat-holders, there's no choice. We've got to have boat-holders right?"

Hui Wa'a Canoe Association will be holding a meeting Saturday morning to decide whether to

go forward with Sunday's race, which involves about 1,500 paddlers.

Meanwhile, the state's Clean Water Branch has ordered a special plankton net to collect samples from the lagoon. Experts said they hope to identify the culprit sometime next week.

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