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Red Dye To Be Dumped Off Sandy Hook

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Apr 30, 2004 3:19 pm US/Eastern

(1010 WINS) (ATLANTIC CITY, N.J.) If the Atlantic Ocean turns a little red this weekend, fear not. It isn't embarrassed, just doing its part for science.

Marine scientists plan to dump 100 gallons of red dye off the coast of Sandy Hook, following the slick out to sea as part of an experiment aimed at tracing the Hudson River's plume as it meets the ocean.

"We're going to tag a piece of the ocean and follow it, actually see what happens to the nutrients, the contaminants, the fresh water," said Robert J. Chant, assistant professor of oceanography at Rutgers.

The experiment is part of a five-year, \$4.2 million study by Rutgers' Institute of Marine and Coastal Sciences aimed at helping predict how river pollution taints the ocean and what species in the food chain are affected first.

The dye, which is nontoxic Rhodamine WT, will be shot from hoses off a research vessel about 5 miles off the New Jersey shore on either Sunday or Monday, depending on the weather.

For the first 12 hours after its release, the dye will be visible as a red patch about 1 mile long.

After that, it will disperse in the water, becoming invisible to the human eye but trackable with sensors used by oceanographers aboard a pair of research vessels following it for up to 100 miles over a five-day period.

In addition, they will run tests to determine how nitrogen, lead, cadmium, mercury and other substances are transported by the Hudson River plume, which deposits 500 billion gallons of water a day into the ocean.

Also being traced: caffeine, which passes through sewage treatment plants biologically unchanged and is therefore valuable as a tracer, Chant said.

Live streaming video and audio from the experiment -- along with the scientists' commentary -- will be available online at

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<http://marine.rutgers.edu/cool/latte>, and still photographs taken from the air will be posted online.

The red dye, which has been used for decades to help in sewage-related studies of water movement, won't harm the environment, according to Chant.

The head of an environmental advocacy group called the National Science Foundation-funded study an expensive way to report on a phenomenon already proven by previous studies.

"Oh my God, oh my God," said Cindy Zipf, executive director of Sandy Hook-based Clean Ocean Action, when told about the study's cost.

"That's a lot of money to spend to focus on watching the pollution disseminate into the ocean and affirm many other studies that have repeatedly found the same result.

"We should be focusing monies on keeping the pollution from getting into the water rather than try to follow it along as it builds up in the food chain," Zipf said.

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