

## NEWS

# Millions of plastic pellets are flowing into Gulf

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It's been more than two weeks since a cargo ship in New Orleans spilled millions – possibly billions – of tiny plastic pellets into the Mississippi River, but state and federal agencies have issued no penalties and are not yet sure who's responsible for the mess or which agency, if any, should clean it up.

Meanwhile, the white pellets, commonly called "nurdles," a raw material for producing plastic products, continue to wash up on both banks of the river and will eventually flow out to sea, where they'll likely be eaten by fish and other marine life, said Mark Benfield, an oceanographer and plastic pollution expert at LSU.

“By the time the agencies get around to determining who's responsible, it'll be too late,” he said. “It'll all be in the Gulf of Mexico.”

Large quantities of nurdles have washed up in Gretna, Algiers Point, Crescent Park in Bywater and the Chalmette Battlefield in St. Bernard Parish. In a one-square-foot quadrant of Crescent Park, Benfield estimated as many as 49,500 nurdles.

On Aug. 2, the cargo ship CMA CGM Bianca broke free from its moorings at the Napoleon Avenue Wharf during a thunderstorm and dropped a large container of nurdles into the river, according to the Port of New Orleans. The nurdles broke out of sacks and dispersed into the water. Port officials determined the nurdles were “irretrievable.”

The 1,100-foot-long ship, which flies under the flag of Malta, had traveled from China and South Korea to deliver goods at Houston and Mobile before arriving in New Orleans. It left a few hours after the spill and is currently bound for Egypt.

France-based CMA CGM Group, the ship's operator, did not reply to requests for comment.

The Coast Guard is investigating the cause of the incident. Coast Guard officials determined that they have no jurisdiction over the nurdles and are not responsible for cleanup. That's because the nurdles are not considered a "hazardous material," like oil or chemical waste, under the Clean Water Act.

Coast Guard and state officials investigating the incident have no estimate for how much plastic was released. A typical 40-foot shipping container can hold about 25 tons of nurdles, according to investigators of a similar spill in South Africa.

"I guarantee you we're talking millions if not billions of nurdles in the Mississippi right now," Benfield said.

While the Coast Guard pointed to the state Department of Environmental Quality as the lead agency investigating the plastic release, DEQ officials say it's not yet clear who should be leading a response.

"We're aggressively investigating and assessing the spill and trying to figure out who's responsible for it," DEQ spokesman Greg Langley said. The DEQ is consulting with the port, state Department of Wildlife and Fisheries and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency "to figure out a direction to take."

Langley said there is no timeline for determining responsibility for the spill or whether there will be a cleanup effort.

"This is something different for us," he said. "It's not like an oil spill or something from a (chemical) plant. We're looking into how to handle it and if we're the correct agency to do it."

If the nurdles aren't considered hazardous, DEQ may bow out. "If it's considered litter, that wouldn't necessarily be us," Langley said.

A nurdles is about the size of a lentil and weighs only about 20 milligrams, but they're ending up in oceans at a rate of about 230,000 tons per year, according to a 2016 report from environmental economists in the United Kingdom.

They fall from ships, are blown from open containers or spill during loading and off-loading.

Nurdles may not be toxic on their own, but they're magnets for bad stuff. Benfield said insecticides and other human-made pollutants readily attach to nurdles and other plastic fragments. At plankton size, these particles are easily mistaken for food by anchovy, menhaden and other small fish. The pollution attached to plastic gets released in the gut and absorbed into the fish.

"When a bigger animal eats the smaller animal, it gets passed up the food chain," Benfield said.

Last year, Texas environmental regulators fined the Formosa plastics company more than \$121,000 for repeatedly failing to stop nurdles from ending up in a creek that flows into the Gulf. The company also agreed to pay \$50 million to settle a lawsuit filed under the Clean Water Act over the nurdle releases.

Louisiana recently approved Formosa's plan to build a massive, \$9.4 billion petrochemical complex in St. James Parish that would turn natural gas into polyethylene and other materials used to manufacture plastics.

Environmental groups blasted the Coast Guard and DEQ for a slow and indecisive response to the nurdle spill. It's the kind of incident that will likely happen more often as Louisiana's plastic production grows, said Anne Rolfes of the Louisiana Bucket Brigade, a group opposed to the Formosa complex.

"Our DEQ just approved one of the largest plastic pellet plants, and yet there's no plan when they spill," she said. "There's no response, no recovery of nurdles and no accountability to prevent this from happening again."

It struck Rolfes as ironic that the ship was allowed to leave shortly after the spill, while she is facing felony charges for dropping a box of Formosa's nurdles on the doorstep of a chemical industry lobbyist late last year as a protest. The incident elicited a response by a police hazardous materials team and Rolfe's arrest by Baton Rouge police in June on a charge of "terrorizing."

East Baton Rouge Parish District Attorney Hillar Moore said Wednesday that his office has not made any charging decisions in the case. A conviction on the charge of terrorizing is punishable by up to 15 years in prison.

"They put me in leg irons and I was in jail all day," Rolfes said. "But they let the people who spill nurdles all over the Mississippi run free."