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Brown Pelicans near extinction

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NEW ORLEANS — Farm pesticides are once again threatening to destroy Louisiana's state bird, the brown pelican.

About 90 per cent of the state's flock, rebuilt from pelicans imported from Florida, in recent years, have died over the last two months, the Louisiana Wildlife and Fisheries Commission said this week.

"It looks like we are down to 100 birds from a restocked population of more than 650," J. Burton Angelle, the commission director said. "Chemical analyses indicate the presence of at least eight pesticides or pesticide residues in the brain tissue of the dead birds."

He identified the chemicals as Endrin, Dieldrin, Toxaphene, DDE (breakdown product of DDT), BHC (Benzene Hexachloride), HCB (Chlorobenzene), PCB (Polychlorinatedbiphenyls) and Heptachlor epoxide.

He said the brains of all the birds tested contained lethal does of Endrin, a pesticide widely used in agriculture in the watershed of the Mississippi River.

"We have ample evidence to indicate that much of the Endrin is coming down the Mississippi River from states to the north of us," Angelle said.

The commission staff is beginning to study the pesticide content of fish in the Gulf of Mexico around the mouth of the Mississippi. The pelican feeds on fish and presumably ingests the pesticides from that source.

Richard Yancey, assistant director of the commission, said that so far only low levels of pesticides have been found in the few fish that have been studied. A pelican eats 90 to 100 fish a day, he said, which gives it a high concentration of the ingested poisons.

McFadden Duffy, information officer for the commission, said the agency's wildlife experts believe that this spring's high water on the Mississippi might have caused the heavy pelican mortality.

The pelican, like some other birds, stores fat in its body and calls it into use for energy when it is under stress. Pesticides have been found in high concentration in this stored fat.

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