

Experts Say Algae Bloom Is Likely the Result of Polaris Employee Error



Polaris' Night Sky earlier this month.

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MIAMI—If the cruise line known for its marketing slogan, “Cruise Clean, Cruise Green,” is to blame for the Biscayne Bay algae bloom, sources say causes could range from a single employee error to systematic malfeasance by crew members aboard the company’s ships.

Last year, Polaris Cruise Lines, a subsidiary of freight transportation company Constellation Cargo, became the first industry adopter of a cutting edge system that’s designed to thoroughly treat all ballast water before releasing it into the environment. Developed by Maritime Technologies (MT), the system was installed across Polaris’ entire fleet, making the company an instant industry leader in sustainable practices. The development was celebrated as a significant step in a broad based, global effort to reduce the transfer of unwanted stowaways -- bacteria, microbes, eggs, and larvae of various species -- from their native environments to new homes where they can quickly become invasive. Polaris’ competitors have been trying to catch up ever since, but none has gone as far as Polaris to protect the ecological health of the communities where they operate.

So how has Polaris, of all companies, ended up in the headlines this month, associated with one of the greatest ecological disasters in the history of Miami?

Engineers familiar with the situation say that MT’s ballast water treatment technology outperforms all competitors, which leads them to believe that the particular species of algae choking Biscayne Bay could be immune to all currently available technologies. However, more likely, Polaris’ system was simply deployed improperly by an employee aboard the company’s flagship, the *Night Sky*, or it wasn’t deployed at all. In other words, simple employee error may be to blame.

“It could have been an honest mistake,” said Mike Williams, editor of *Water Tech Magazine*. “It could also be that Polaris doesn’t have effective protocols, controls, or training in place, which would ensure that employees know how to operate the technology properly.”

Williams indicated that ballast water treatment technologies are still in their infancy. Industry standards are set by the UN’s International Maritime Organization (IMO), which issues guidelines for marine pollution prevention. A number of technologies are pending IMO approval, but there is currently no single technology that achieves IMO goals for all waters and ships. MT’s system was the first U.S.-based technology to receive IMO approval for large cruise ships.

"It's normal to have growing pains with new technologies," Williams said. "However, MT's system was third-party tested and received IMO approval, which is more than most companies can say."

Yuri Maslov, a microbiologist at the University of Florida, agrees with Williams' assessment of the technology. Maslov is familiar with MT's design and calls it the best available. However, his explanation of the ecological disaster unfolding in Biscayne Bay suggests malicious actions by Polaris employees.

"My guess is the ship simply wasn't using the system," he said, "maybe intentionally to save on fuel."

A *Night Sky* employee, who spoke with *Free Press International* under conditions of anonymity, seemed to confirm these more troubling suspicions. He indicated that while company policy dictates that all ballast water should be treated, more often than not it is dumped untreated. Most crew members received training on the new system during the first six months after it was installed, according to the employee, but training efforts haven't been sustained since.

"We're a pretty high-turnover crew," he said, "which means there are always new people to train. That hasn't really happened."

Furthermore, those who have expressed concerns to the ship's engineering supervisors have been told not to worry about it, that there wasn't a budget to support additional training. According to the employee, the *Night Sky's* crew isn't alone.

"I spoke to friends on other ships who described similar experiences. They were told by their superiors that the system burns too much fuel and they aren't legally required to use it. Supervisor bonuses are tied to fuel costs, so go figure."

Spokespeople at Polaris could not be reached for comment on this story.

There is still great uncertainty surrounding the causes of the algae bloom that's expanding in Biscayne Bay, impacting area residents, businesses, and tourism. Investigations and scientific studies are ongoing. For now, all eyes are on the Miami-based cruise line, which until very recently was considered the eco-friendliest in the industry.