IDENTIFICATION GUIDE: Water Foam fact sheet

Decomposition of aquatic plants and animals contributes to the formation of foam on the water's surface.

Disturbance from wind and rainfall causes gases to mix with surface film, creating foam.

Detergent foam will usually have a perfume odor and retain a bright white color.
(Photo: Clemson University Cooperative Extension)

Description:

Foam on water is often a natural occurrence when rainfall and wind mix up fatty substances and gases from decomposing plants and aquatic animals. The gases are trapped in the fatty substances and form bubbles and foam. Natural foam usually smells earthy or like cut grass and may be light brown, tan or white. Detergent foam smells like perfume and usually retains a bright white color. Detergents from wastewater discharges were a common reason for water foam in the past, but this is less common now due to improved treatment.

Occurrence:

Foam can occur in all freshwater areas, including wetlands. The movement of water due to rainfall and wind causes foam to form along windward shores and in coves. Lakes, small streams and areas with large numbers of aquatic plants are more likely to have foam when the plants decompose. Slow moving waters with high concentrations of algae (blooms) may also experience foams when the blooms decompose.

Significance:

Natural foam is not harmful to humans or animals. Detergent foam may be the result of an illegal discharge and should be reported to local authorities. You can also report suspicious discharges by contacting the N.C. Department of Environment and Natural Resources at 877-623-6748.