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Article published August 22, 2010
**Algae woes finally getting some attention**

To pop culture buffs, 1967 was the Summer of Love.

Perhaps the Great Lakes region's 40 million residents will look back at 2010 as the Summer of Bloom.

Algae blooms, that is - not Flower Power.

The Ohio Department of Health, the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency, and the Ohio Department of Natural Resources only recently began testing Ohio's 400-some lakes for algae.

Until now, the only testing had been for bacteria, even though western Lake Erie has had a recurrent bout with toxic algae the past 15 years.

The methodology agencies are using to test for algae is, by their own admission, a work in progress.

Swimming advisories were in effect for 17 Ohio bodies of water as of Friday. Dozens haven't been tested.

The cash-strapped agencies said they don't have the money nor the manpower to fully assess the public health threat. They said they are greatly relying on public officials and residents to help them prioritize which lakes to study. In other words, the squeaky wheel gets the grease.

On Aug. 11, by what appears to be sheer coincidence, the public beach at East Harbor State Park became Ohio's first along the Great Lakes shoreline to have an advisory posted since at least the 1970s.

While on their way back from a seminar at Ohio State University's Stone Laboratory near Put-in-Bay, two Ohio EPA employees noticed western Lake Erie's pea-green hue. They drove to East Harbor, the closest state park upon reaching the mainland, for a sample. Rather than wait days for the test result, the ODNR immediately put up an advisory. East Harbor, ironically, has had a long history as one of the region's most problem-free for bacteria.

Nobody had a good answer why other parks within the vicinity weren't getting similar algae warnings, other than that resources are spread thin. Two days later, Maumee Bay State Park - historically one of the area's worst for bacteria - got Ohio's second advisory along Lake Erie.

This summer's bloom should come as no surprise, given the unrelenting heat and the largest phosphorus level in the Maumee River since Heidelberg University's National Center for Water Quality Research began keeping records in 1975.

Keep in mind algae blooms usually don't peak here until mid September. Hence a prediction from Stone Lab manager John Hageman that Lake Erie appears headed for "the mother of all blue-green algae counts."

Lake Erie's most common toxic algae, microcystis, has confounded scientists by coming back almost every summer since 1995, more than two decades after the modern era of sewage treatment began.

The world's population has doubled since the 1970s. Much of the landscape has been displaced by big-box stores and neighborhood strip malls. The Earth's climate is warming. Cold-intolerant forms of algae are coming earlier and staying longer.

Phosphates that help algae grow were banned in laundry detergent, but the movement to phase them out of dishwashing detergents is relatively new. Dishwashers themselves are far more prevalent.

Sewage networks haven't grown in sync with population and sprawl. The need for affordable food has intensified while land available for farming has shrunk, resulting in a consolidation of livestock and a concentration of their manure. The volume of crop fertilizers and manner in which they are applied are getting more attention.

An immediate fix seems unlikely, but the cost of doing nothing is great.

Algae stinks. It's unsightly. It drives down property values, drives away tourists, hurts the Great Lakes region's $7 billion fishery, and is a public health threat. It's a menace that public officials keep telling each other needs to be treated like one. Perhaps they finally are in this Summer of Bloom.

Contact Tom Henry at:
thenry@theblade.com
or 419-724-6079.