

Letter to the Editor: Algal Outbreaks Are Harmful to Our Health

After an absence of over three decades, this summer once again found that large-scale algae outbreaks were back in parts of the Chowan River, Edenton Bay, Albemarle Sound and Little River. State health officials encouraged the public to avoid contact with large accumulations of algae and prevent children and pets from swimming or ingesting impacted water.

The cyanobacteria growing in these waters – commonly known as blue-green algae – can cause skin rashes if touched, flu-like symptoms like abdominal pain, nausea, vomiting and headaches if swallowed, and respiratory irritation in people who get in the water or handle the algae. Some outbreaks can produce chemicals that are toxic to animals and people who drink the untreated water. Fish caught in these waters should not be eaten, and boats and equipment used on these lakes should be thoroughly rinsed with clean water.

According to the N.C. Department of Health and Human Services, blue-green algae is most common in the summer, and toxic algae outbreaks are more likely to infest bodies of fresh water when the weather is warm and waters are stagnant. When conditions are right, algae can multiply and accumulate rapidly. The algae outbreak may turn the water neon green, blue-green, or reddish-brown; may cause a bad smell and taste in the water; and may form a foam or scum on the water's surface. The algae may periodically use up oxygen in the water, killing fish.

Unfortunately, the situation is likely to get worse before it gets better. The conditions leading to harmful algae outbreaks – warm water temperatures and excessive nutrients from fertilizers, animal waste, and septic systems – are likely to be present next summer as well. In addition, climatic events and weather patterns have become more favorable for outbreaks. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency reminds us scientists predict that climate change will have many effects on freshwater and marine environments. These effects, along with nutrient pollution, are expected to cause harmful algal outbreaks to occur more often, in more waterbodies and to be more intense. As the sun heats the water and rainstorms cause runoff carrying nitrogen and phosphorus, additional waterways may be at risk.

The return of algal outbreaks to local waters is a threat to human health, fisheries, recreation, property values, tourism, and to the regional economy. Clean Water for All, a national coalition working for clean, safe, and abundant water within our communities urges local, county and state health officials to be extra vigilant before next summer for signs of harmful algal outbreaks, and to regularly test the water in vulnerable lakes and waterways.

Eight counties around the Albemarle Sound and the Albemarle District of Soil and Water have adopted and sent to legislators a resolution to strengthen critical drainage and water quality infrastructure. This resolution requests resources to help identify the causes of and solutions to the algal outbreaks, including proactive monitoring of water quality in creeks and rivers where N.C Department of Environmental Quality does not have monitoring stations. This overall collaborative effort with local governments, community and academic partners is essential for our overall health and well-being.

Harmful algal outbreaks are a public health threat. It is up to us to take action to solve this problem.

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