

Officials: Lake Erie algae is worst ever

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COLUMBUS — Toxic algae blooms have never been worse in Lake Erie, and the situation is threatening fish and tourism, Ohio officials said.

Analyses show numbers of walleye and yellow perch — the lake's most-lucrative sport-fish species — drop significantly as the level of algae rises, and that affects the lake's \$10 billion annual tourism industry, The Columbus Dispatch reported.

Algae blooms are fed by phosphorous, which has been above safe levels, Roger Knight, program administrator for the Ohio Department of Natural Resources, said in a report presented Wednesday to the Lake Erie Commission in Columbus.

"The trends are moving in the wrong direction no matter where on the lake you go," Knight said.

Increased farm fertilizer runoff because of record rainfall is one reason for the higher phosphorous levels. Knight said.

Blue-green algae, or cyanobacteria, are common in most Ohio lakes and grow thick in water polluted with phosphorus from fertilizer, manure and sewage washed into streams by rain. The algae can excrete liver and nerve toxins that can sicken people and threaten fish and wildlife.

Algae warning signs were posted at public beaches in eight state parks, including along Lake Erie, this past summer.

"We saw things this summer that were unreal," said Jack Madison, general manager of a marina in Ottawa County.

"People could set beer cans on the algae. It is that thick."

A complicating factor is that much of the phosphorus in Lake Erie dissolves in the water and is immediately available to feed algae growth. Particulate phosphorus — phosphorus that has chemically bonded to dirt or plants — is less accessible to algae.

The head of the Lake Erie Waterkeepers, a group that advocates preservation of the watershed, said that several years ago, people would call and ask if the fish were biting.

"Now, the first question is, 'How bad is the algae?'" said the group's president, Dave Spangler.

Spangler said waterfront business is down nearly 30 percent, and he would like to see state officials confront the problem with more urgency.

The state spent \$3.5 million this year to spray aluminum sulfate to counteract phosphorus in Grand Lake St. Marys, where algae grew so thick in 2010 that visitors were told not to touch the water.

"We'd like an all-hands-on-deck effort like we saw at St. Marys," Spangler said.

Scott Nally, director of the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency, said that his office will submit a proposal for counteracting the Lake Erie pollution to Gov. John Kasich by February.