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University of Toledo graduate student Sarah Panek uses a rake to pull microcystis, a type of blue-green algae, from Lake Erie near Oregon in northwest Ohio.

Panel says algae fight needs money

Some would like to see better monitoring for streams, rivers

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COLUMBUS — Ohio's battle to suppress Lake Erie's harmful algae has government and farmer support.

But it needs more money and regulation, a panel told state budget crafters on May 15.

Lake Erie's record 2011 algal bloom was fed largely by farm fertilizers, storm water runoff from streets and sewage overflows. The nutrients got into the water because of heavy spring and summer rain.

Lake Erie had a relatively algae-free summer last year because of a drought that lasted for months.

But signs point to another bad algae outbreak this summer because of this spring's rain.

"We could still achieve a good year if we have less rain in the next two months. If it's wet, we're concerned," Jeff Reutter told an Ohio Senate subcommittee. Reutter is director of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Ohio Sea Grant research program, which is affiliated with Ohio State University's Stone Laboratory near Put-in-Bay.

Before sending the Senate its version of a proposed \$61.5 billion two-year budget last month, the House restored \$285,000 in funding to Ohio Sea Grant that would have been reduced under Gov. John Kasich's plan.

The budget would also roll over \$550,000 for the next two years from an existing \$3 million fund created last year to focus on the health of Lake Erie.

"I believe that this simultaneously is a very important environmental issue and critical economic issue facing the state," said Sen. Randy Gardner, Republican of Bowling Green, who pushed for creation of the Healthy Lake Erie Fund while in the House last year.

"Billions of dollars in economic activity and tens of thousands of jobs are at stake," he said.

Some advocates urged senators to support greater investment.

Kristy Meyer, the Ohio Environmental Council's managing director for agriculture, health and clean water programs, asked for an additional \$1.7 million for better monitoring.

"A continual mantra that we are hearing from agencies and scientists alike is that if we had

better monitoring data we could really focus our efforts on the subwatersheds that drain into the larger rivers that then drain into Lake Erie," she said.

Gardner plans to ask fellow senators for additional funding, but he's not sure how much yet. A final budget must reach Gov. John Kasich's desk by June 30.

Since 2006, the Ohio EPA has been working toward development of a new nutrient load standard for acceptable levels of phosphorous and other nutrients in the inland streams that feed Lake Erie. It said the new standard could be in place by 2014.

When monitoring shows that a stream's standard has been surpassed, the Ohio EPA and the Ohio Department of Natural Resources would attempt to trace the problem back to its source.

"This is where the heavy lifting will be," said Brian Hall, assistant chief of Ohio EPA's Division of Surface Water.

The state continues to work with farmers on better agricultural practices to minimize runoff.

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