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Delavan Lake algae not cause for concern, official says

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JIM DAYTON
Sunday, July 10, 2016



ANGELA MAJOR

A boat on Delavan Lake is boarded by people carrying fishing gear.

◀ 1 of 2 ▶

DELAVAN--After the Wisconsin DNR confirmed an increase of blue-green algae in Delavan Lake, swimmers, boaters and other water enthusiasts were told to avoid coming in contact with the murky substance.

National headlines about a severe blue-green algae outbreak in Florida, one that prompted Gov. Rick Scott to declare a state of emergency in the affected counties, made some locals

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wonder if Delavan Lake would soon become a thick, green mat of standing water.

Those assumptions appear to be misplaced, after Walworth County's Department of Health and Human Services said in a Thursday release that most of the harmful algae detected in late June had subsided.

Blue-green algae, technically known as cyanobacteria, are normal in lakes at low levels and are still an important part of the ecosystem, said Delavan Lake Sanitary District Administrator Jim DeLuca. The algae can cause problems if they start to bloom, but DeLuca compared the increased levels to a slight fever.

"It's like normal is 98.6 and you're running a 99. OK, you're a little elevated," he said. "But this isn't like we're running a 105-degree fever."

Delavan Lake has not had a flare-up of blue-green algae for five years, DeLuca said. Years ago, the lake struggled with water quality, causing the town and city of Delavan and state Department of Natural Resources to take on an ambitious lake rehabilitation project completed in 1992.

The project involved lowering water levels, killing the fish population to eliminate carp and constructing ponds to help trap nutrients and sediments before they reached the lake. Before the rehabilitation, the water clarity was only inches deep, DeLuca said.

Even with a recent increase of blue-green algae, water clarity is 12 feet, DeLuca said. The algae flare-up is not an indicator the lake is returning to its problems from a few decades ago, he said.

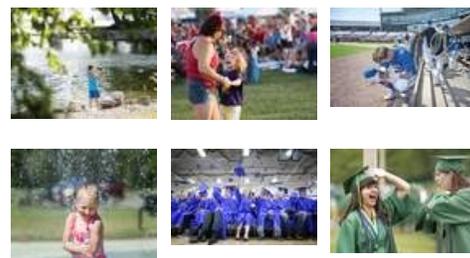
The algae blooms can produce toxins that cause illness in both people and pets, said Janis Ellefsen, a health officer with the Walworth County Department of Health and Human Services. The harmful algae is different from regular lake flora and is distinguished by its thick cluster of yellow, green or brown scum, she said.

Signs posted along the Delavan Lake shoreline warn people about



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the algae's health risks, but the lake has remained open, said town of Delavan Administrator John Olson in an email. The health concern led to a decrease in Delavan Lake recreational activity during Fourth of July weekend when compared to last year's holiday, he said.

Some did not notice an impact, however.

John Mikrut, who owns Lakeside Bait and Tackle near the lake's inlet, said the holiday weekend was still busy. Harold Edington, an employee at Lake Geneva Marine working at the company's Delavan location, said business has remained steady.

Todd Brown, on vacation from his home in northwestern Ohio, said he, his wife and two daughters were not deterred from riding their personal watercraft. Their lakes back home had a similar problem, so they were familiar with the risks, he said.

Everyone in the Delavan Lake Sanitary District did not see the flare-up as cause for concern, DeLuca said. He believes the advisory was a good precaution because there can be many causes of toxic algae blooms.

Warm weather and extended sunlight can spark algae growth, and because of the weather's uncertainty, signs remain posted explaining the hazards of ingesting blue-green algae, Olson said.

Looking ahead, DeLuca said additional research was needed to learn more about blue-green algae and its triggers. The Delavan Lake Sanitary District has worked with local farmers to prevent chemical fertilizer runoff, which can cause the lake to become over-saturated with nutrients that stimulate growth.

“It's like fertilizing your lawn,” DeLuca said. “You're fertilizing water plants, and they're going to get excited and grow. If we can keep those products out and keep them in balance, all lakes will do well.”

Retention and detention ponds, plant buffers and porous pavement all have been part of an effort to trap nutrients from runoff before they reach the lake. Though this flare-up of algae

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