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Blue-green Algae Identified in Lake Tschida; Public Advised to Avoid Algae Blooms

BISMARCK, N.D. – The North Dakota Departments of Health (NDDoH) and Agriculture (NDDA), Animal Health Division, have issued a blue-green algae advisory for Lake Tschida, also known as Heart Butte Dam, located in Grant County south of Glen Ullin. An advisory means that people and animals should avoid areas in Lake Tschida where blue green algae blooms are occurring. The NDDoH, Custer Health District, and the US Bureau of Reclamation are posting signs around the lake to advise swimmers, fishermen, water skiers and others to avoid contact with bloom areas.

The production of blue-green algae, also known as cyanobacteria, often happens during hot weather in bodies of water that are used by people, pets, and livestock. Blue-green algae discolor the water they live in, and can cause foam, scum, or mats to appear on the surface. Blue-green algae can also produce cyanotoxins. When present in water, cyanotoxins are dangerous for both people and animals.

Exposure from ingesting affected water can cause illness in people and animals, and can result in death. There are no known antidotes for the toxins. People and animals that swallow water containing cyanotoxins can become sick with severe diarrhea and vomiting; numb lips; tingling fingers and toes; dizziness; or rashes, hives, or skin blisters. Children are at higher risk than adults for illness because their smaller size can allow them to get a relatively larger dose of toxin.

Lake Tschida is a popular recreational area for those who live around the lake and for daily visitors. Recreational activities can still be done safely at the lake as long as the bloom areas are avoided. Users are asked to pay attention to the water near them when they are on the lake or its shore because blooms do not stay in one place. “A bloom can be present at one location or along one shoreline one day and be gone the next,” said Mike Ell with the NDDoH’s Division of Water Quality.

After receiving reports of blue-green algae, the NDDoH tested samples and found microcystin at one location at a concentration almost twice as high as the state’s health threshold of 10 µg/L (parts per billion). Microcystin is a cyanotoxin caused by blue-green algae.

“The NDDoH will continue to monitor the lake throughout August and into September to ensure that the bloom and cyanotoxin concentrations do not worsen and will keep the public informed of the status of the water,” added Ell.

The NDDOH recommends the following steps to avoid exposure to cyanotoxins:

- Respect any advisories or warnings announced by public health authorities. If you see posted signs or hear messages to stay out of a certain body of water, respect the message.
- Do not swim, water ski or boat in areas where the water is discolored or where you see foam, scum, or mats of green or blue-green algae on the water.
- If you swim in water that might have a cyanobacteria bloom, rinse off with fresh water as soon as possible.
- Do not let pets or livestock swim in or drink from areas where the water is discolored or where you see foam, scum, or mats of algae on the water.
- If pets (especially dogs) swim in scummy water, rinse them off immediately –do not let them lick the algae (and toxins) off their fur.
- Do not irrigate lawns or golf courses with pond water that looks scummy or smells bad.

For more information on public health issues, contact Mike Ell with the North Dakota Department of Health at 701.220.5025, or Keith Johnson with the Custer Health District at 701.667.3370. For specific questions concerning Lake Tschida, contact Patience Hurley with the US Bureau of Reclamation at 701.221.1204.

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