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High Levels of Blue-green Algae Toxins Identified in Cottonwood Lake; Public is Warned to Avoid Contact with Water

BISMARCK, N.D. – The North Dakota Department of Health (NDDoH) and Agriculture (NDDA), Animal Health Division, have issued a blue-green algae warning for Cottonwood Lake, located near Alamo in Williams County, due to high levels of microcystin in the water. Microcystin is a cyanotoxin caused by blue-green algae. When present in water, cyanotoxins are dangerous for both people and animals. The Cottonwood Lake is a popular recreational area that is used for fishing. “While fishing is still allowed with the proper precautions, activities such as swimming or consuming water from the lake should be curtailed until further notice,” says Mike Ell with the NDDoH’s Division of Water Quality. Boating should be done with caution so water is not accidentally ingested.

Earlier this week the NDDoH received a report of a blue-green algae bloom from a North Dakota Game and Fish Department fisheries biologist. NDDoH staff investigated the bloom and confirmed the presence of blue-green algae in the lake, including along the swimming beach and boat ramp areas. On Tuesday, signs were posted around the lake by the Alamo Rural Fire Chief warning the public that blue-green algae are present in the lake and that the water can be harmful to humans and pets. Water samples collected this week also revealed microcystin levels over three times recommended safe levels.

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. 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. State health officials urge the public to avoid contact with or swallowing water affected by blue-green algae, and to protect their pets and livestock from waters that are affected.

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Blue-green algae discolor the water they live in, and can cause foam, scum or mats to appear on the surface. 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.

Please take the following steps to avoid exposure to cyanotoxins:

- Respect any advisories announced by public health authorities. If you see posted signs or hear messages to stay out of a certain body of water, respect the warning.
- 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 accidentally 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.
- Don't irrigate lawns or golf courses with pond water that looks scummy or smells bad.

For more information on public health issues, contact Mike Ell, North Dakota Department of Health, at 701.220.5025, or Daphne Clark, Upper Missouri Health District, at 701.774.6419.

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