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Blue-green Algae Identified in Lake Ashtabula: 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 Ashtabula, located in Barnes County north of Valley City. An advisory means that people and animals should avoid areas in Lake Ashtabula where blue green algae blooms are occurring. The NDDoH, Barnes County Emergency Management, and the US Army Corps of Engineers 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 Ashtabula is a popular recreational area. Recreational activities, including fishing, can still be safely enjoyed at the lake as long as the bloom areas are avoided. Freshly caught fish are still safe to eat.

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.

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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. For specific questions concerning Lake Ashtabula, contact Richard Schueneman with the US Army Corps of Engineers at 701.845.2970 or Sue Lloyd with Barnes County Emergency Management at 701.845.8510.

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