

7-10-09 Slimey Waters Drawing Attention

People love to live near the water. The breezes refresh. The sunrises delight. It calms the soul and soothes the spirit.

When water is clean we can play and swim to our hearts' content without any concerns. When water is polluted it can be ugly to look at and downright dangerous to enter.

There are many kinds of pollution. For many years now, the Department of Public Health has required that health agents sample the public bathing waters once a week for one kind of pollution: for levels of bacteria indicative of human waste. We also fill out a field data report, indicating such factors as temperature, weather, and amount of last rain and if we notice weeds, trash, birds or algae. While I may have wondered in the past if anyone is really reading them or using the information I put in the report, I wonder no longer. Last summer our Department of Public Health responded to my concerns about high levels of algae in Halifax's west Monponsett Ponds. They traveled to Halifax to sample the water and confirmed that there was an algal bloom of the blue green cyanobacteria that is known to be toxic to animals and people. They ordered the West Pond closed and guided me with that protocol.

Since last year, MA DPH has received grant funding from CDC to study the potentially toxic algae for the next five years. Halifax's West Monponsett Pond was chosen as one of only five in the whole State to study. While that may not initially sound like the kind of recognition we were hoping for, I am thrilled to receive the assistance in solving the problem. We get data for free. That data is worth many thousands and can be used to discover the cause or causes of the algae. That data will also guide the treatment.

DPH is not the only interested party. Residents around White Island Pond in Wareham have been using their own funds to determine the cause of their increase in algae. They have concluded the cranberry bogs are at fault for releasing fertilizers into the pond. Pembroke is spending money to treat their ponds for both weeds and algae. In a rare instance of overlap between DPH and DEP, I received a call recently from DEP with concerns about the turbidity of the West Monponsett Pond. I recall that several years ago, my office received notice that the West Monponsett Pond was on a State's "impaired waters" list because it was so murky with sediment. Lack of clarity alone can be deadly. Children sometimes drown in these waters simply because they could not be seen when they went under.

Representatives from DEP will be taking samples of pond water and will be, in particular, looking at water near the cranberry bogs for evidence of fertilizer releases, which, of course, also feed weeds and algae. I believe they will be issuing a TMDL at the conclusion of their study. That stands for Total Maximum Daily Load. So, if DEP finds that a factor, such as turbidity or a chemical such as urea, is dangerous, they will determine what the safety threshold is for that particular factor. The representative from DEP did not know about DPH's concurrent study. So, it was, shall we say, interesting, to be able to introduce them.

Halifax has also spent its own town funds to Dr. Lyman to study the weed and algae growth and to make recommendations. I hope that before more money is spent by the Town of Halifax, people will listen to what all these scientists find. I am sure there will be a lot of concurrence on the contributing factors. Fertilized lawns. Cranberry bogs

not being careful enough about control of the fertilized waters. The more difficult decision will be to decide if we shall spend now for a quick but temporary fix or are we motivated enough to make lifestyle changes and to insist on the same from our local business partners?

Stay tuned. This is going to be interesting.

Cathleen Drinan is the health agent for the Town of Halifax. Let her know if you suspect illness or rashes are caused by contact with this summer's pond water and if you see any fish kills. She can be reached at 781 293 6768 or cdrinan@town.halifax.ma.us.