

3-9-12 Waters Are Connected and Need to Be Protected

In response to the severe problem of algae in so many of our formerly beautiful and useable water bodies, people across the country are taking action. In order for the action to be effective, the causes of the algal blooms need to be identified. Perhaps climate change has allowed the algae to increase. Algae like warmth. There might be old failing septic systems feeding the algae. Algae need nutrients in order to survive and “bloom”. Often times there are agricultural uses surrounding the algae. In one part of the country, that agricultural use might be a cattle farm, with manure run-off. In another part of the country, cranberry bogs might be discharging fertilizers into the ponds when they are draining the flooded bogs. Do you see green lawns right down to the edge of the water? Lawn fertilizers will feed the algae also. Those lush lawns might belong to one resident or they might be part of a golf course, country club or dining & function business. Even stormwater run-off from our streets, flowing into the catch basins, which, in turn, then flow directly into wetlands or water bodies, bring a variety of pollutants including garbage and dog waste. In fact, it’s pretty gross what arrives in our waters and the result is a very ugly picture.

Algal blooms are not only ugly but potentially dangerous. Just as we New Englanders are accustomed to hearing about red tides making it dangerous to eat shellfish, we need to understand that the green ones we now see in some of our ponds can be a real public health threat. The blue-green algae are potentially dangerous, as some of them have the ability to produce toxins. If the toxin is present, ingesting the algae during swimming or water skiing is one way for the toxins to be released in our gut, where they can result in neurological and organ damage.

Locally, White Island Pond on the Plymouth/Wareham line has dealt with this issue. Pembroke has formed their own watershed committee and has plans to treat Oldham Pond for algal blooms. Halifax’s West Monponsett Pond has been closed due to the algal blooms for most of the last few years because of increased knowledge of the problem, in conjunction with our State Department of Public Health providing test results and the protocol for advisories. The problem of algae in the West Monponsett Pond has been worsening for at least a decade.

In response to the continued test results indicating the need to close beaches, and the continued public outcry for help from the residents living on and using the Monponsett Ponds, the Halifax Board of Health feels compelled to do whatever we can to discover and prevent the nutrient sources allowing the algae to bloom and grow, like lines from the Sound of Music song. Preventing the “feeding” of the algae is necessary because treating it is not enough to keep it away. Halifax does have plans to bind the main nutrient source of phosphorous with Alum, allowing it to sink to the bottom of the pond. But if we keep feeding it, isn’t this a waste of money?

It is a complicated issue, though, involving more than the Town of Halifax and we need the assistance of more people than the Board of Health can provide. The Towns of Hanson and Pembroke have ponds and streams draining into the Monponsett Ponds. The city of Brockton uses the water from the Monponsett Ponds as a tributary to a surface water supply, that of Silver Lake, dating back to an act of legislature in 1964. That adds up to three towns, one city, the Monponsett Watershed within the Taunton River Watershed and legislature, all, unwittingly perhaps, playing a role in a dance macabre.

In order to change the tune of that dance, it is time to recognize the players and cooperate toward mutual goals. We need to form a committee of concerned citizens to work on the problem with a regional approach. In this spirit, Halifax is reviving a name we used many years ago when we worked on the goal of sewerage treatment around the ponds. I called the meetings POW! It stood for Protect Our Waters! Oh, sure, some joked that it stood for Prisoners of Wastewater but that works, too, for addressing any wastewater issues along with all the other factors influencing the algae dovetail very nicely into an effective prevention and protection program.

On Thursday evening, March 15, at 7:00 p.m. in the upstairs Great Hall at the Halifax Town Hall, the first revival of POW! will present an overview of the Monponsett Ponds: Stakeholders and What Is at Stake. It will be an interesting meeting, for it brings together so many different views and needs. It is hoped it will be the beginning of a Monponsett Watershed Committee. It is hoped that we can and will achieve Best Management Practices for residents, businesses and towns and that the combined efforts will result in the return of clean useable water for all.

Cathleen Drinan is the Health Agent for Halifax, MA. Can't make the meeting? You can reach her at 781 293 6768 or cdrinan@town.halifax.ma.us