

9-15-17 Best Efforts and Best Judgment

We are winding down from our eighth year of testing the cyanobacteria (blue green algae) in the Monponsett Ponds. The West Monponsett Pond has been closed due to high algae counts most of the summer and even the East Monponsett Pond was closed for a few weeks. It must be so discouraging for the people who live on ponds! At least we have a responsive Board of Health and Board of Selectmen and we have formed a watershed association, the “Monponsett Watershed Association”. Go MWA! We have been awarded numerous grants and have brought together many stakeholders (with the exception of Brockton!) But, still, in the meantime, enough already! We all want to get rid of it! It is discouraging for me, too; I’m the one having to deliver the bad news. It’s not easy. It just has to be done.

It’s a little tricky sending out those bad news advisories. At first, I would send out all the details. “The Massachusetts’ Department of Public Health’s threshold of 70,000 cells per milliliter has been exceeded. This week’s collection indicated a count of 350,000 cells/mL. Therefore, MA DPH has advised the posting at all entry points.....”

You get the idea. That’s not really my style, though. So, I would try to make it friendly and informative. Yet, no matter how many details I included or how readable I thought it was, someone would ask, “So, is the beach closed?” It did make laugh, as I learned that lesson. I learned it again and again. I needed to give enough information to guide people, without putting them to sleep and don’t forget the bottom line! The beach is closed. In fact, that point became so clear that the town ordered huge signs with the name of the pond and, sadly, the default word of “Closed”. An “Open” sign can be placed over the word “closed” at any time. They can be seen from a distance. Message is clear!

Then there are the people who add their own thoughts to my guidance and quote me as saying something I never said! On this issue, an example happened just recently. Someone said/asked, “So, you sometimes ban waterskiing, right?” I explained to the man that I have never used the word “ban” for water skiing but have, instead, tried to educate people so that they could understand that water skiing causes the water (and algae) to be aerosolized, where it can then easily get into their eyes. That could be dangerous.” The man says, “Oh, maybe they meant you banned jet skis.” Ah, well, I tried.

Another point that I need to always keep in mind is to include the fact that there are two Monponsett Ponds in Halifax. They are linked by a culvert, by history, and, at times, by the diverting of water by the City of Brockton. So, people link them in their minds with good reason. If you hear news about one, you want to know if it applies to the other. Right now and as usual but not always, it is the West Monponsett Pond that is closed to such recreational uses such as swimming, jet skiing and water skiing. Small bodies, such as those of children and pets are more vulnerable to the potentially harmful effects of algal blooms. As children play, they splash, dive and laugh, taking in a lot more water than us proper adults. It is so wonderful to

watch children's exuberance for life but in the middle of green algae, it is not a good idea. It is up to us adults to keep them from harm.

This study of the blue green algae/cyanobacteria began with our Department of Public Health (MDPH) with funds from CDC (Center for Disease Control and Preventions). The grant funding was discontinued several years ago and we are fortunate that our Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) has continued that task. Someday that assistance may disappear, also. It means that we will have to be less dependent on numbers, such as "over 70,000 cells/mL is potentially dangerous." We will have to use our best judgment. On one end of the blue/green algae spectrum is clear water; you're good to go! On the other end is a floating scum looking like paint or the green is so thick and deep that it resembles pea soup; Stay out! In the middle is a slight green at the edge of the pond and/or a dusty look to the water from suspended algae that is not pollen. (Pollen looks yellow.) I would not let my children play in that or my dog drink that water. However, an informed person might decide to look further with a boat, see what the middle of the pond looks like and might decide to engage in some water sports where the water is clear.

As we work to treat and prevent the causes of algae in our ponds; we, both you and I, must apply our best efforts to prevent the algae, to protect ourselves, our children and our pets. Let's continue to keep each other informed, so that we can use our very best judgment.

Here's the link to MA DPH's protocol on blue green algae:

<http://www.mass.gov/eohhs/docs/dph/environmental/exposure/protocol-cyanobacteria.pdf>

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