Ecology South

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**COMMENTARY**

**Autumn activities include finding the root of Lake Erie's toxic algae**

BY TOM HENRY

BLADE COLUMNIST

This time of year normally is devoted not only to football and foliage, but also to finding causes of a toxic form of algae that plagues western Lake Erie.

Like scientific detectives, experts spend weeks sorting through satellite images of toxic blooms, which usually dissipate as the water cools in mid- to late-September.

They merge the summer's sampling data with visual records about where the massive blob grew, day by day. Their goal is to gain new insight into how future blooms of potentially deadly algae can be minimized.

This annual rite has gone on since 1995, when the United States and Canada became alarmed by the return of microcystis algae after a 25-year absence. Microcystis killed 75 people in Brazil in 1996.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention led a major international probe of those deaths, drawing attention to global algae pollution.

This year -- knock on wood -- western Lake Erie's algae have been almost nonexistent. That's been a mighty reprieve after record outbreaks in 2010 and 2011.

At Ohio State University's Stone Laboratory on Gibraltar Island, near Put-in-Bay, water is clear down about 80 inches. Last year at this time, clarity was less than 2

inches deep.

It would be wonderful if we could say the problem's solved, but it's not. This year's lack of algae is an anomaly caused by drought. Lack of rain kept farm fertilizers and raw sewage out of the water, depriving algae of its food.

To Stone Lab director Jeff Reutter, this year's hiatus firms up scientific connections between what leaves the land and what grows in the water. Mr. Reutter believes Ohio needs to achieve a permanent, two-thirds reduction in runoff to beat the algae menace. But that can't be done by crossing fingers and hoping rain falls only at the right time.

Gov. John Kasich's administration deserves some credit for not taking a pass on Lake Erie's algae problem this year. It could have declared victory when the battle isn't close to being over.

The administration's commitment to this issue wasn't in the form of a large expenditure. Nor was it in Governor Kasich's silly reference to the directors of the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency, the Ohio Department of Agriculture, and the Ohio Department of Natural Resources as his "three amigos" for fighting algae.

It's come in more subtle ways, such as working more closely with people such as Paul Pacholski, vice president of the Lake Erie Charter Boat Association.

Mr. Pacholski is not a stooge for the Republican Party, nor does he mince words about runoff's impact on water quality. But he said he's noticed state agencies have been more willing to communicate with each other and groups such as his on algae during the past 18 months.

Algae, he notes, is not a problem that will go away by throwing money at it. Major corporations, such as Cedar Fair LP, which operates Cedar Point amusement park in Sandusky, have come forward with concerns about what algae could do to their businesses.

Ohio has lost more than 100 charter boat operations because of algae. The algae blooms of 2010 and 2011 drove away would-be clients and forced charter boats farther into the lake, which raised fuel costs for each trip.

This summer, at Mr. Pacholski's urging, the state equipped 10 fishing captains with six-foot pipes, so they could grab water samples on the way back from their fishing expeditions.

The samples were transported to labs for analysis. That made it possible for Ohio to have more frequent sampling across a wide area of the lake -- something state officials do not have the resources to do on their own. The state normally samples 13 sites monthly.

That buy-in from the private sector is a small step. But now, anything helps. Lake Erie is too precious to let algae or any other form of pollution win. More research and testing, better land-use regulations near shorelines, and stronger air-pollution laws all are needed.

As fall settles in and scientists put the finishing touches on this year's algae research, Governor Kasich's office should think of what it can do other than cross its fingers and hope rain falls only at the right time.

Tom Henry is an editorial writer and columnist for The Blade.