**Ohio to receive nearly $7.5M to deal with algae**

By Tom Troy, Blade Politics Writer, Toledo Blade

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency will provide nearly $7.5 million to Ohio to address harmful algae blooms in Lake Erie, most of it as grants to help farmers pay for practices that keep algae-feeding nutrients on the farm and out of the lake.

Federal lawmakers and EPA administrators announced the grants Monday at the University of Toledo’s Lake Erie Center in Oregon.

In all, the EPA is providing $8.6 million to Ohio, Michigan, and Indiana in the wake of Toledo’s water emergency of Aug. 2-4. It’s part of a $12 million expenditure that the EPA promised at a water quality conference in Chicago on Sept. 24.

Regional EPA manager Susan Hedman said the rest of the $12 million appropriation will be announced soon. The money will combat the threat posed to drinking water by fertilizers and manure.

Farm nutrients are largely blamed for causing the massive harmful algae bloom that poisoned Toledo’s water supply with microcystin, leading about 500,000 water consumers in metro Toledo to rely on bottled water.

The Ohio Department of Natural Resources will receive approximately $5.9 million and the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency will get about $1.5 million.

The state’s natural resources department is expected to make grants available to farmers along tributaries that feed into Lake Erie to test soil, plant winter cover crops, install drainage improvements, such as gates that block the outflow of water when crops are not in the fields, and build structures that control manure runoff at livestock operations.

The $1.54 million directed to the Ohio EPA will be used over three years to enhance monitoring on Maumee River tributary watersheds, including those of the Blanchard River, Swan Creek, Auglaize River, and Lower Sandusky, and on rivers that flow directly into Lake Erie.

The meeting was attended by U.S. Sen. Sherrod Brown (D., Ohio), U.S. Rep. Marcy Kaptur (D., Toledo), Ms. Hedman, Ohio EPA Director Craig Butler, and Ohio Natural Resources Director James Zehringer, along with officials from Michigan and Indiana.

Toledo Mayor D. Michael Collins, who did not know about the EPA announcement meeting, welcomed the cash infusion but portrayed it as a mere start.

“I think the true cost of this probably exceeds $12 million. If we are going to see more than remedial action I would expect we would see approximately $1 billion,” Mr. Collins said.

He said he’s basing the figure on the spending that occurred to restore Lake Erie’s health after it was declared a dead lake in the 1960s and 1970s.

The mayor also said he’s disappointed there hasn’t been more action since the Chicago conference of U.S. and Canadian mayors.

“I’m concerned there has not been a follow-up as it relates to seeking an executive order from President Obama,” Mr. Collins said. He has been campaigning for direct intervention by the President to solve the annual algae threat.

Joe Cornely, spokesman for the Ohio Farm Bureau, said farmers will appreciate the partnership between the state and federal governments.

“The other thing that farmers are going to like is that it looks like it’s not a one-size-fits-all kind of approach. There are going to be multiple options,” Mr. Cornely said.

He acknowledged that bills are pending in the state legislature that aim to further regulate farm fertilizer and manure practices, such as prohibiting application when the ground is frozen.

“The jury is still out on how that would impact on farmers and how it would impact on water quality,” Mr. Cornely said.