



The Iowa Policy Project

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NEWS RELEASE

Blue-green algae: Unclear water raises issues of danger

Ten years later — the unaddressed problem of cyanobacteria in Iowa

IOWA CITY, Iowa (June 21, 2018) — Iowa should grab the low-hanging fruit to reduce blue-green algae pollution in waters and require vegetative buffer strips throughout the state in 10 years.

“This is a reasonable goal that is achievable, effective and quantifiable — unlike the no-deadline, no-requirement nature of the current Nutrient Reduction Strategy,” said David Osterberg, co-author of a new Iowa Policy Project report on cyanobacteria, or blue-green algae.

Authors Carolyn Buckingham, Mary Skopec and Osterberg illustrate in the report that the serious problem of cyanobacteria in Iowa waters — posing health risks including threats to drinking water and also restricting recreational opportunities — is expanding since IPP reported on the issue 10 years ago.

“Fresh analysis confirms the warnings,” said Buckingham, an attorney with a background in environmental law and policy. “New evidence suggests that the problem is growing worse, and climate change and increased nutrient runoff are major contributing factors.”

She cited a recent University of Iowa study, evidence from Des Moines Water Works, the Iowa Nutrient Reduction Strategy progress report, and data on sharp growth in state-ordered beach advisories.

The full report and executive summary are available at
<http://iowapolicyproject.org/2018docs/180621-cyano.pdf>.

Skopec, who is executive director of the Iowa Lakeside Laboratory Regents Resource Center, said Iowa Department of Natural Resources data show a large and steady increase from 2009 to 2016 in the number of beach advisories.

“Those advisories reflect a low standard for Iowa water quality vs. those in some states — and if the state were to follow guidance from the U.S. EPA, the number of those advisories would triple,” Skopec said. “More worrisome is that the number of lakes with an advisory also increased during this time.”

Buckingham noted the voluntary NRS includes vegetative buffers as an option for farmers to help reduce the addition of nitrogen and phosphorus to Iowa waterways. Yet, no rule requires their installation.

The report points out Minnesota and Vermont make buffers mandatory, and that the Environmental Working Group calls that approach the “low-hanging fruit” toward a solution.

“It is time for the state of Iowa to step up with a sensible approach to water quality, which year after year gets merely lip service from state officials,” Osterberg said.

“The NRS is proving to be inadequate to the task without changes to assure progress to a goal of cleaner, safer water for drinking and recreation.”

The Iowa Policy Project is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that offers research and analysis on public policy issues in energy and the environment, economic opportunity and budget and tax policy. Reports are available at www.iowapolicyproject.org.

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