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**The Ongoing Threat of Algal Blooms**  
 Posted by NYPIRG on July 28, 2025 at 8:22 am



As New Yorkers choked through another day of poor air quality – driven by ongoing Canadian wildfires – another environmental threat looms, this one found in the state’s surface waters. The threat of “harmful algal blooms,” which can jeopardize drinking water supplies and the public’s health, is spreading across the state.

The blooms are a blue-green slimy substance that floats in water. Harmful algal blooms aren’t the typical green surface ooze seen on the top of lake waters. While ugly to look at when at the surface, a bloom can also be extremely dangerous, so much so that the state has a policy that warns people to stay out of the water should there be evidence of one.

The heating planet drives the production of algal blooms. Warmer temperatures prevent water from mixing, allowing algae to grow thicker and faster. Algal blooms absorb sunlight, making water even warmer and promoting more blooms.

While not every algal bloom is toxic – some algal species can produce both toxic and nontoxic blooms – toxic blooms can cause problems for swimmers and other recreational users in the form of rashes or allergic reactions. People who swim in a bloom may experience health effects, including nausea, vomiting, headaches, respiratory problems, skin rash and other reactions. There have also been reports nationwide of dogs and livestock dying shortly after swimming or wading in a bloom.

Heat alone doesn’t stimulate algal blooms. As we know, climate changes have also caused stronger, more powerful storms, storms that release much more rainwater than in storms of the past. Those incredible downpours swiftly flush whatever is sitting on the land directly into lakes, so instead of letting a natural filtration

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process take place, nutrients that would benefit the soil are washed into surface waters and wreak havoc in the water in the form of algal blooms.

Algal blooms are an increasing menace. New York State has experienced a tenfold increase in the number of waterbodies experiencing a bloom over the past 10 years and \$6 billion in mitigation expenses and lost economic value.

Obviously, algal blooms pose a threat to recreational water bodies. But they pose a greater danger to drinking water supplies. Once these blooms are found in drinking water supplies, they are hard to treat. The toxins released from algal blooms make it difficult for treatment facilities to remove them safely and efficiently.

Usually, algal blooms crop up in late summer and early fall. This year, in the Spring they began showing up in lakes across New York. There have been over 450 algal blooms reported by the DEC as of last week.

According to the Department of Conservation, in Albany, for example, Lawson Lake has had confirmed algal blooms. In Saratoga, Saratoga Lake has had a confirmed algal bloom. Areas in which the New York City reservoir system is located (most notably in Putnam and Westchester counties) have had reports of algae blooms.

Unfortunately, the only way to confirm whether an algal bloom is toxic is through laboratory testing. As a result, experts advise that when in doubt, stay out. If you want to check out the lakes in which algae blooms are a concern, you can go to the DEC website, which has a harmful algal bloom notifications webpage that it updates weekly.

When it comes to minimizing the threat of algal blooms, New York policymakers can take action. And, in fact, there is no shortage of such plans already developed.

But when it comes to protecting surface waters and drinking water supplies, the state has to do a lot more to reduce the runoff from agriculture, landscaping and wastewater sources. New York must be *proactive* about protecting drinking water supplies and recreational waters. The costs for prevention are cheaper than the cost of remediation and illness. That's a lesson we've had to re-learn too many times – particularly when it comes to public health and environmental threats.

Unfortunately, the situation will not get better in our lifetimes. More frequent heat waves, bigger wildfires,

rising sea levels, hotter temperatures are the unmistakable signs of climate change. Last year was the hottest ever and with that, surface waters will get warmer too.

While we all must embrace changes that follow the science and reduce the emission of greenhouse gases which causes the worsening climate catastrophe, there are things that we can do to better protect surface waters. We should demand of policymakers that strong steps be taken and taken quickly.

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