

Help to reduce weeds, algae in lakes, rivers

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A Sound Off caller today succinctly sums up the problem that plagues many Wisconsin lakes, rivers and streams each summer.

Once the algae bloom starts, the caller says, Lake Koshkonong is virtually unusable.

While that may overstate the case, the caller suggested that the lake district would be smart to spend more money fighting pollutants. New research supports that idea.

Limnologist Stephen Carpenter of UW-Madison found a surprising amount of phosphorous in the soil. Excessive phosphorous and other nutrients wash into lakes and rivers, accelerating weed growth and algae blooms. Carpenter told the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel that it could take hundreds of years to reverse the problem.

That means excessive weed growth will continue to clog our waters, depleting oxygen and leading to fish kills such as Madison has experienced this season. Excessive algae blooms will continue to turn water into pea soup.

While algae blooms naturally, some forms are toxic. Two years ago, a Cottage Grove teen died after taking a dip in a golf course pond. Last year, a dog died after swimming in Lake Kegonsa . Kegonsa and Crystal Lake , both in Dane County , were closed to swimming, as were two lakes in Dunn County . Already this year, algae has forced Madison to close beaches.

What can be done?

The first and simplest step is to reduce the use of fertilizers, especially those with phosphorous. Homeowners should use only the amount necessary. Don't spread fertilizer on sidewalks and driveways, where it easily washes into storm sewers and winds up in lakes, rivers and streams. Likewise, keep leaves, grass clippings and other yard debris from washing into storm sewers.

Dispose of litter in containers. Do not feed birds near swimming areas.

Madison has banned phosphorous in fertilizers this year. Other waterfront cities should follow suit.

Farmers and developers must take even more steps to reduce soil erosion. Residents can support local ordinances that require construction sites to use silt curtains.

Farmers have been reducing phosphorous in fertilizers, and the state is updating its non-point pollution law.

Rep. Spencer Black, D-Madison, wants to boost funding to prevent runoff by nearly \$7 million in a budget amendment he'll introduce this week. If lawmakers trim similar dollars elsewhere, it merits consideration.

Carpenter also suggests that farmers limit animal feed containing phosphorous.

Municipalities and waterfront homeowners should plant buffer strips that use native plants, which are much more effective at filtering runoff than typical lawn grass.

Steps we take today will help prevent damage to recreational waters that could take centuries to correct.

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