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## Agencies asked to assess algae in Indiana's lakes

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By Rick Callahan, Associated Press Writer

INDIANAPOLIS — After another summer of blue-green algae woes on many Indiana lakes, three state agencies have been asked to develop a statewide monitoring system to track levels of the plantlike bacteria.

Blue-green algae doesn't just give surface waters an unappealing, greenish cast -- it can also release toxins that can sicken people, causing diarrhea, vomiting or nausea. And it has killed dozens of dogs across the nation over the years.

Armed with new data on the state's algae problem, the state Legislature's Environmental Quality Service Council voted 9-0 last month to direct the state's environmental, health and natural resources departments to devise a strategy for monitoring algae levels.

Council member Rep. David Wolkins said the panel decided it was time for the state to begin focusing on the algae issue after years of complaints about fouled lakes.

"Nobody seemed to be in control so we asked those three agencies to get together and do something," said Wolkins, R-Winona Lake.

He said he was surprised to learn that one of the lakes filled with the algae is Palestine Lake, a 400-acre lake in northern Indiana's Kosciusko County that he had always thought was a swamp.

"I've down there and it's absolutely the ugliest looking lake," he said. "People don't want to even go in it or put their boats in it. It just looks like a big swamp."

The council's vote came after the state issued warnings in September about central Indiana's Eagle Creek, Geist and Morse reservoirs, which have been plagued by elevated algae levels. Those warnings urged people to avoid coming into contact with algae and not to ingest the water.

The Indiana Department of Environmental Management, which will spearhead the state's monitoring effort, hasn't had much time since the council vote to put together its plans, said Bruno Pigott, assistant commissioner for IDEM's Office of Water Quality.

He hopes the agency has an approach in place by next spring, but funding remains in question in light of state spending cutbacks to offset a continuing multimillion dollar decline in state revenues.

IDEM spokeswoman Amy Hartsock said the agency estimates that an algae monitoring system would cost millions of dollars to operate.

Lenore Tedesco, director of IUPUI's Center for Earth and Environmental Sciences, has studied Eagle Creek, Geist and Morse reservoirs for years, tracking their high algae levels and passing her data on to the state.

This year, she sampled 15 Indiana lakes and found elevated algae levels in 14.

Tedesco said her data, along with a 2007 study by U.S. Environmental Protection Agency that found one of the toxins associated

with the algae present in 36 of 56 Indiana lakes clearly shows that it's a statewide problem.

Tedesco, who testified before the legislative council about her research, said blue-green algae is fueled by a wide variety of nutrients, including discharges from sewage treatment plants and runoff from farm fields, livestock farms and lawns treated with fertilizers.

James Howell, who heads the state health department's public health and preparedness division, said he had not heard of any human cases of algae-related illnesses in the state, although the state has not required reporting of such cases.

Tedesco said about 25 states have adopted state algae standards because of either dog deaths and human illnesses. Other states have imposed bans on fertilizers that contain phosphorous, she said.

"There's a whole bunch of states that are ahead of us because they've reacted to it and they've been vigilant about that," she said. "In Indiana, we just don't have much information about what's out there."

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