



The Iowa Policy Project

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Blue-green algae: Unclear water raises issues of danger

Ten years later — the unaddressed problem of cyanobacteria in Iowa

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Cyanobacteria, or blue-green algae, cause a water body to be less clear. What is clear, however, is that this substance is more prevalent, and alarmingly may also carry toxins. Blooms may or may not produce a toxin and it is sometimes difficult to know if cyanobacteria are even present.

Fresh analysis confirms warnings in an Iowa Policy Project report nearly 10 years ago that this serious problem is expanding.¹ Cyanobacteria already affect recreational use of Iowa water even with Iowa's limited monitoring of beaches. But the issue is about more than recreation.

The closing of the water system in Toledo, Ohio, in 2014 was a wakeup call for those responsible for ensuring that U.S. drinking water is safe. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and Iowa Department of Natural Resources are aware that it is a looming threat to drinking water systems that draw source water from surface waters.

It is also clear that the Iowa Nutrient Reduction Strategy (NRS), designed to confront the addition of nitrogen and phosphorus to Iowa waters, is not addressing the job adequately. New scientific studies show Iowa is not doing enough to stop nutrient pollution. However, one agricultural practice endorsed by the NRS — vegetative buffers — can become a potent policy if it is greatly expanded. Establishing buffers along water bodies is a valuable agricultural practice beneficial to wildlife, aesthetics, and the removal of nutrients. They are very effective in reducing phosphorus loads to water inside the state and from the state to the hypoxia zone in the Gulf of Mexico.

While such buffers are among the practices being promoted by Iowa's NRS, stronger action is necessary. Iowa should follow Minnesota and Vermont to make such buffers mandatory. We agree with the Environmental Working Group that this practice is the "low-hanging fruit" that should be used to reduce Iowa's serious nutrient pollution problem. That is why we conclude that our goal should be to buffer all Iowa streams in the next 10 years — a reasonable goal and one far less arbitrary than to have no timeline at all — the present situation with the NRS.

As cyanobacteria becomes even more of an issue, buffers are almost designed to contribute greatly to its control. Buffers directly address the nutrient problem that is making cyanobacteria blooms worse but they will also add carbon storage to Iowa farms, which indirectly contributes to confronting and curbing climate change, the other reason blooms are proliferating. In this sense vegetative buffers address two problems at once: climate change and polluted runoff.

¹ Heffernan, Andrea and Teresa Galluzzo. Scum in Iowa's Waters: Dealing with the Problem of Excess Nutrients. (2009) Iowa Policy Project.