

News Release

ALGAE: TOO MUCH OF A GOOD THING?

RIDEAU VALLEY, June 28, 2009 — There are millions of tiny aquatic plants called algae in all natural waterbodies including the Rideau River, its tributaries and lakes. They are usually harmless, green and use energy from the sun and nutrients from the water to live, grow and reproduce.

These little plants are critical to the life in our lakes. They are the first, vital links in a natural food chain that all other water creatures rely on including insects, frogs, minnows, small fish right up to top predators like bass, muskie and lake trout. Under normal circumstances, algae also produce large amounts of oxygen helping to keep the water quality in a healthy state.

So they are very important.

But too much of a good thing can be very bad! During warm weather, populations of algae can grow quickly to form large masses called “blooms.” These blooms commonly occur in late summer and early fall when the water is warmest and nutrients are abundant. The key nutrient is phosphorus which has been fingered as one of the prime culprits in these sudden excessive growth spurts.

Phosphorus is a plant fertilizer which helps plants grow. It can get into the waterways from leaking or inefficient septic systems and through runoff from lawns and decaying organic matter. As the algae mat grows and expands, the lower levels of algae die off and decompose over large areas which can use up much of the oxygen in the water and degrade the entire aquatic ecosystem.

Reducing the amount of extra phosphorus entering the water from human activities is an effective way to combat algae blooms. To help reduce phosphorus from your property, you can plant a shoreline buffer, reduce ornamental lawns near the water, control overland runoff, stop using lawn and garden fertilizers and have your septic system inspected and pumped regularly. These are all excellent ways to reduce excessive algae in our lakes and rivers.

While Rideau Valley Conservation Authority can answer some of your questions and concerns about algae on your lake or river shore, the Ministry of the Environment and your local Health Unit are the agencies that have the response role. They will work together to let the public know if an algae bloom becomes harmful to human health.

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