

'Don't explain to me why; tell me how to solve it'

Toxic blue-green algae

Staff
SHERBROOKE

Municipalities around Lake Massawippi have created the Parc régional Massawippi to help battle toxic cyanobacteria. "Everybody has to work together to limit the possible damage this summer," said Hatley Township Mayor Pierre Levac, chairman of the group.

A blue-green algae bloom at the end of last summer created havoc around Lake Massawippi when a five-week ban prevented citizens from drinking,

or for a time even bathing in, water in the municipalities of Ayer's Cliff, Hatley, Hatley Township, North Hatley and Waterville.

All but Waterville are members of the group, and Ste-Catherine-de-Hatley is also a member.

The municipalities are drawing up an action plan in the event of another algae outbreak.

"We all know the situation that occurred at the end of the summer of 2006," said Levac. "This year, we want to pull out all the stops to limit this phenomenon."

PLEASE SEE ALGAE ON PAGE 5

ALGAE:

CONT'D FROM PAGE 3

Blue-green algae produce toxins that can cause severe itchiness, nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea if ingested. The toxins feed on phosphorus, a common ingredient in chemical pesticides and fertilizers, which can easily drain into lakes and rivers whose banks have been cleared or deforested.

"If a crisis similar to the one at the end of the season last year were to happen, we would like to reassure all citizens that the various emergency measures in place will be rapidly made known to them by their respective municipalities."

Levac said the goal of the regional park is for municipalities to join together to better manage the lake. That means overseeing dams, the environmental health of the area and the management of shorelines through the enforcement of municipal regulations.

Levac said much has been said about what causes outbreaks of toxic algae. He said the time has come to discuss how to prevent it.

"Don't explain to me why. Tell me how to solve it," he said. "We want to know exactly what to do."

As part of the measures to stop another outbreak, the municipalities are planning a vast awareness campaign to encourage lakeside dwellers and others to be more responsible.

Lakeside mayors strongly urged citizens to change their ways and adopt more respectful behaviour toward aquatic ecosystems.

"It's important that people are aware that everyone has a role to play in this," said North Hatley Mayor Stephan Doré. "They have a duty to get involved."

"Some habits may appear to be difficult to change but the stakes are too high not to try because we are talking here about preserving something that is vital: our safe drinking water."

Citizens are invited to take part in a variety of workshops and activities planned throughout the summer.

"The important message is that we have to stop blaming people," Levac said. "Instead let's get together and do something about it."

Levac said municipalities are working in conjunction with the Memphremagog and Coaticook regional municipal councils (MRCs), and a number of environmental watchdog groups such as Lake Massawippi Water Protection association, the St-Francis watershed committee COGESAF, and RAPPEL, an umbrella group of almost four dozen lake and river protection associations in the Estrie region.

"We share the some goals and the some mission," he said, adding that groups are working together to come up with a plan that will be distributed to the mayors, town managers and inspectors of the five municipalities.

The plan will list all available resources, governmental or municipal, as well as actions to take in the event of a disruption in drinking water because of an outbreak of cyanobacteria. It will serve as an essential reference source for all matters dealing with Lake Massawippi and its tributaries.

"The plan will state who does what and what concrete measures need to be

taken to prevent another crisis," Levac said.

Among them is the reforestation of river banks. Levac noted municipalities spent the weekend distributing and planting thousands of saplings along their shorelines.

Levac said the cyanobacteria crisis is not a short-term problem; long-term action will be needed to prevent future outbreaks. He also noted the five municipalities are just a small part of the watershed, which receives sediments and nutrients from far and wide, much of it from the Tomifobia River and the Niger (formerly known as Nigger River) and some of it from south of the border.

"This is a problem for everyone and we have to resolve it together."

THE RECORD, WEDNESDAY,

MAY 23, 2007