

Growth of algae in lake near Edmundston 'a dire situation'

Rankin, Andrew . [Telegraph-Journal](#) [Saint John, N.B] 13 Aug 2012: A.1.

Louis Labrie knew something was seriously wrong when the lake he lives near turned a bright toxic green early last month.

Subsequent tests completed by the province's department of environment confirmed his worst fears: that Lac Unique in Saint-Francois-de-Madawaska, about 60 kilometres west of Edmundston, is being ravaged by algal blooms, an explosive growth of blue-green algae - and the residents inhabiting the 100 or so homes along its shores are mostly to blame.

The naturally occurring algae is feeding off the nitrogen and phosphorous nutrients that are pouring into the lake in the form of raw sewage, grass fertilizers and detergents and then releasing huge amounts of toxins into the water.

The unusually warm weather this summer has exacerbated the problem. Contaminated fish are dying because the algal blooms also rob water of oxygen. The lake currently has a unusually high pH reading of 10, far above the average measurement of seven. Last week the province's department of health advised lake residents against swimming in the water or eating fish from the lake.

Labrie, a member of the association of Lac Unique camp owners, says that the people living on the lake's shore have a responsibility to clean up their act but the province should also take a lead role in finding a solution.

The problem isn't just contained to Lac Unique. The lake flows into other bodies of water, including the St. John River.

Allen Curry is the director of the Canadian Rivers Institute and a professor of biology at UNB Fredericton. He says toxin levels in the lake have reached critical levels and the province must step in to remedy the situation.

"It doesn't appear that the department of environment wants to take this seriously," said Curry.

"The science that needs to be done to determine what lakes are threatened by algal blooms is not happening.

"Lac Unique should be green in no way shape or form. Contamination is happening 10,000 fold faster than normal."

He said several other New Brunswick lakes are also contaminated by algal blooms, including Baker Lake, also near Edmundston, and Lake Utopia, near St. George.

Curry said the ideal solution would be to prevent dangerous nutrients from entering Lac Unique, allowing the body of water to flush over time, a process he estimates would take at least a decade.

The lake had been contaminated in the 1980s after pork farms were set up along its shores. After the farms were closed about 10 years ago the situation improved. But with an increase in population the problem has returned.

Since the pork farms were licenced by the province Labrie says the government has a responsibility to try to solve the problem.

On Friday the association will meet with residents to encourage safe environmental practices. Labrie hopes some of the residents will replace leaky cedar septic tanks with concrete ones as well as limit fertilizer use and start using phosphate-free detergent.

Even small amounts of phosphorous and nitrogen can cause blue-green algae to grow and produce toxins at dangerous levels, said Curry. Changing ingrained human behaviour has always proven to be a difficult task, he added.

"We have cottages and hatcheries on lakes that are only adding to the problem," said Curry. "It's hard to reverse the situation - it's a dire situation. It's about educating people about how to manage waste water, having better septic systems, understanding why you can't put so many cottages on a lake. Even with the best practices you're going to have these nutrients going into our lakes."

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