

## **Lake algae sparks warning; Alert comes as pilgrims gather at Lac Ste. Anne**

Sinnema, Jodie. [Edmonton Journal](#) [Edmonton, Alta] 25 July 2012: A.1.

Two days after people waded into Lac Ste. Anne to offer their prayers during the annual religious pilgrimage, Alberta Health Services issued a warning for people not to drink, wade or swim in the waters because of blue-green algae.

"I'm very concerned," said Clay LeBlanc, executive director of the Lac Ste. Anne Pilgrimage.

LeBlanc said except for high water levels, he hadn't noticed any scum on the south shore of Lac Ste. Anne, where about 10,000 people are camping for the pilgrimage that began Sunday and ends Thursday morning.

Each year, many of the participants wade into the lake about 75 kilometres northwest of Edmonton, praying and seeking the healing powers of the water. The pilgrimage has been a tradition since the late 1800s, when Metis and First Nations began travelling to the lake to celebrate the Feast of Saint Anne, believed to be the grandmother of Jesus Christ.

Rains on Monday night made the area a mud pit. The storm moved water up the shore dramatically, LeBlanc said.

On Tuesday morning, a public health inspector visited the beaches around the lake and reported seeing the algae.

"It looks like it's just starting," said Dr. Gerry Predy, senior medical officer of health for Alberta Health Services, who saw photos of the distinct blue-green growth.

Signs were set to be posted on beaches Tuesday evening, warning swimmers to stay out of the water.

"Blue-green algae produce a toxin (poison) that can cause serious illness to animals or humans who drink or have skin contact with water containing this toxin," the health alert from Alberta Health Services noted. "Although weather and wind conditions can cause algae blooms to move from one location in the lake to another, the toxin can stay in the water even after algae have moved or disappeared."

The health advisory suggested people keep their pets from drinking in the lake and consider limiting the number of fish they eat from the waters.

Those exposed to the spores or who drink contaminated water can experience skin rashes, sore throat, red eyes, swollen lips, fever, nausea, vomiting and diarrhea. Symptoms typically appear within one to three hours and disappear in one or two days.

Children are often hit hardest because they may accidentally drink water when playing in the lake.

But people who use the water as a primary source of drinking water can develop liver damage over time, the health advisory notes.

"At this point, I think it's probably a pretty small risk," Predy said. "It may not have been too significant (an algae growth) on Sunday. As long as the people didn't ingest the water, probably the worst thing that can happen is they can get a bit of a skin rash."

Predy said no cases have yet been reported.

"We recognize the pilgrimage is a spiritual kind of experience," Predy said. "While it is an advisory, people can choose to still wade in the lake if they want to. We're not banning the use of the lake. We're just advising people that if you do use it, there is a risk."

George VanderBurg, MLA for Whitecourt-Ste. Anne, urged people to heed the ban. He remembers swimming through the algae as a kid and being sick with a bad rash for several weeks.

Predy said prairie lakes, especially those with a lot of human activity around them such as Lac Ste. Anne, regularly see the blue-green algae in July or August.

Vanderburg said his constituency has 12 summer villages around various prairie lakes.

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Credit: Jodie Sinnema; Edmonton Journal