**AYC Ecology**

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**Algae tests result in higher bills**

**Ottawa County raised water rates by 4.5 percent**

by Kristina Smith

Ottawa County water customers are paying 4.5 percent more for their water this year, partly because of the cost of removing toxins caused by harmful algae.

Blue-green algae that grows on Lake Erie in late summer and early fall can produce a toxin, called microcystin, that can cause gastrointestinal illness and skin irritations.

Normal water treatment processes don’t always remove the toxin from the finished drinking water, causing plants like Ottawa County’s to use additional chemicals, methods and testing to make sure the water coming from the tap is safe.

Those extra steps add up, and the county has been forced to pass on some of that cost to the users, Ottawa County Sanitary Engineer Kelly Frey said.

“The water treatment industry is really not tuned in as far as dealing with problems from the algae,” Frey said. “It’s a struggle, but we’re OK. It’s a scary thing.”

Boiling water does not remove the toxin, so removing it at the plant is imperative, he said.

Ottawa County’s water treatment plant serves Oak Harbor and 8,000 customers in Danbury, Catawba, Portage, Bay, Erie and Salem townships, Frey said. It also sells the city of Port Clinton drinking water, he said.

For county water customers, the minimum monthly water payment increased in January by $1 — from $22 to $23. Minimum usage is 4,500 gallons of water.

After that, prices rise incrementally for each additional thousand gallons of water used. The overall increase is about 4.5 percent, Frey said.

There are no state or federal regulations for testing and treating the algal toxins. The Ohio Environmental Protection Agency is working with plant operators on Lake Erie and at inland lakes to voluntarily test and monitor for the toxin, OEPA spokeswoman Dina Pierce said last week.

OEPA, Ohio Department of Natural Resources and Ohio Department of Health recommend finished drinking water — water that has gone through the treatment process and comes out of the tap — not have more than 1 part per billion of microcystin, Pierce said.

“Communication is better now than it was in the past,” Frey said. “We’re still in the beginning stages of trying to figure out how to manage the treatment.

“I’ve been concerned EPA hasn’t stepped up. They have changed. They are more involved.”

Harmful algae in Lake Erie is caused by phosphorous runoff. Phosphorous fuels the thick, green blooms.

The algae has been a problem on Lake Erie since the mid-2000s. 2011 was the worst year on record for the blooms, and scientists are expecting a significant bloom again this year after heavy spring rains.