**What’s in your water?**

Sandusky Register

Several Lake Erie water experts met with the public at the Kalahari Convention Center to discuss the health of the lake and harmful algal blooms.  The plan: To educate the public about the facts and dangers of algal blooms — when they occur, why they happen and how to slow them down.  “We’re watching coastal communities to try to avoid another Toledo,” said Chris Winslow, acting director for OSU Stone Laboratory. Winslow referred to last summer’s drinking water crisis in which algal blooms injected dangerous chemicals into the drinking water, forcing 500,000 people to be without tap water.

Winslow said it would have been unhealthy for people to drink that water, which could have caused liver damage.  “We’re also working with farmers and other residents about how to keep chemicals on the fields and not running off into Lake Erie” Winslow said.  Algal blooms, a rapid increase of algae in the water, can produce microcystin, the toxin that caused the drinking water scare in Toledo last summer. Simply put, harmful algae is caused from excess phosphorus making its way into the lake.

The main sources of phosphorus: Fertilizer, manure, storm water and failing septic tanks. Winslow said algal blooms can grow when spring rainfall helps push runoff from farms and residential land into Lake Erie. Usually, algal blooms will rise in late July or early August and thrive until October, when temperatures begin to cool and kill the algae.  From there, the algae will sink to the bottom of the lake and die, where microorganisms consume it and use up oxygen in the process. This cycle can grow the “dead zone” in Lake Erie — an area where there is less oxygen in the water, causing issues for fish and the ecosystem.  To help gather more data, educate the public and get more people involved, Rotary District 6600 — a district with offices in cities between Toledo and Cleveland — is selling water test kits.  The kits are available for purchase online and include 10 different sets of testing strips.  “We’re asking the public to assist us in sampling water sources,” said Jim Page, chief of staff for the International Yachting Fellowship of Rotarians. “This includes sampling streams, ditches, rivers or Lake Erie for phosphorus, ammonia and nitrates” Testing steps include:

·             Select two public locations along a waterway. The locations should be about 1 mile apart.

·             Fill a bucket with water from the location

·             Dip hatch test strips (similar to swimming pool test strips) into the water and match the strips to a color found on a provided chart.

·             Go online to report the results and to view results from other water sources.  Testing should be done before and after rain.

Economic impact

Teaching the public about how to keep Lake Erie healthy is vital to the tourism industry, said Dave Spangler, vice president of the Lake Erie Charterboat Association.  “Fishing is a $1 billion industry for all of Lake Erie,” Spangler said. “We have charters all over Lake Erie. We see how popular it is for people from out of state.”  Spangler said there were more than 700,000 fishing trips on Lake Erie in 2013, according to the latest data they had available.  “Now, think if there are three or four people on a boat for each trip,” Spangler said. “Those numbers add up quickly. Those people are here to use hotels and eat at local restaurants.”  Spangler said it’s clear fishing is popular in the area, especially in Ottawa County where more fishing licenses are sold than in any other county.  “The first question I used to get from out-of-state people on the phone was ‘How are the fish biting?’” Spangler said. “Now it’s ‘How bad is the algal bloom?’ And that’s not the thing we want to hear.”  By keeping the public informed about the environmental and economic facts, members of the panel hope they can get more people invested in the health of Lake Erie.  Want to get involved?

WHAT: Water testing kits available for purchase

WHERE: To be used in ditches, streams, rivers and Lake Erie n COST: $30 per test kit

HOW: Go online to waterkeeper. ivolunteer.com  to sign up and receive your water testing kit