Ecology South

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**Sound off on algae**

The International Joint Commission has been meeting in Ohio and Michigan to hear from residents about how this region is harmed by Lake Erie's toxic algae. It's an

opportunity to discuss how excess fertilizer, sewage, and other forms of water pollution pose serious public- health and economic consequences.

The commission acts as a mediator on shared water resources for the U.S. and Canadian governments. It plans to offer ideas for refining water-pollution controls to

environmental regulators on both sides of the border.

This summer's drought has suppressed the algae problem in Lake Erie. But record-setting outbreaks in 2010 and 2011 far exceeded global health standards.

The commission has made Lake Erie's algae a priority for research under the new Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement that U.S. and Canadian officials are

expected to sign this fall. The accord provides a framework for mutual governance of the Great Lakes. The attention to algae could lead to more research dollars and

political muscle.

The commission can't impose mandatory restrictions on agriculture or other industries. But it offers an important voice if the Great Lakes region is to galvanize support

for more-targeted fertilizer application, buffer strips, and other soil-retention techniques.

Michigan and Ohio could use the commission's help to persuade the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to stop redepositing dredged material from the Toledo shipping

channel into the fragile open water of North Maumee Bay. Scientists and elected officials oppose that practice.

A new confined-disposal facility would cost $200 million or more. The commission could encourage the federal government to bear more of that cost.

The commission also should advocate more federal aid to sewage control, because sewage overflows often contain algae-producing phosphorus. Toledo is working

to eliminate overflows from its system.

But the situation is not as promising in other Great Lakes shoreline communities and in Detroit. The commission could advocate restored funding of the federal Clean

Water State Revolving Fund -- the greatest source of revenue for sewage work, but a target of cuts by politicians.

Western Lake Erie residents have much to say about algae when it becomes a health threat and obstacle to economic growth. The commission process allows them

to weigh in meaningfully.