**EPA releases rules for algal bloom warnings**

Sandusky Register

As it gears up for the 2015 harmful algal bloom season, which usually starts in late July, the Ohio EPA has released new guidelines for how public officials should react to algal bloom contamination of city water supplies.  The EPA said its new public notification guidelines apply to three levels of algal bloom toxin contamination of the treated public water supply by microcystin, the toxin produced by the algal blooms:

·         Microcystin detected in the water. If the amount is very low, the public will be told it’s still safe to drink the water and officials are working to eliminate the problem.

·         0.3 parts per billion or more of microcystin in treated water. The public will be told the water should not be drunk by infants or preschool kids, pregnant women, nursing mothers, people with preexisting liver conditions and people receiving dialysis.

·         1.6 parts per billion or more of microcystin in treated water. No one should use the water for drinking, making infant formula, making ice, brushing teeth and preparing food.

Ohio EPA director Craig Butler told the Register the state’s new guidelines are based on new guidance provided by the U.S. EPA on algal bloom toxin levels in drinking water.  The state agency made the federal guidelines more stringent by adding pregnant women, nursing mothers, people with liver conditions and people on dialysis to the list of folks who should shun even low levels of algal bloom toxins.  The latest science recommends the two-tiered system, but Butler said he knows people will make their own decisions on whether to drink the water if any microcystin toxins are present.  “The best thing we can do is be very transparent,” he said.  Last August, people in greater Toledo were advised not to drink the water during the weekend because of algal bloom contamination.

Butler was asked if new forecasts that Lake Erie will likely have a large algal bloom this summer have made the situation more urgent.  “I don’t think we could have gotten any more sense of urgency than we have had” Butler said.  But he said a big algal bloom doesn’t necessarily mean toxins will get in the treated water supply. If cities remain vigilant, the probability of something bad happening will be low, he said.  Sandusky’s water services superintendent, Doug Keller, said he plans to follow the state guidelines.  Keller, who is retiring from his post in two weeks, said the state EPA has helped municipal water treatment plants prepare for possible algal bloom problems.  State officials have had conference calls on treatment processes, and have given Sandusky advice on treatment, he said.  In addition, the state EPA organized an Erie County conference, held at the Erie County Health Department, to discuss how the emergency response will be handled if there problems with the water supply, Keller said.  “That was great to get everybody on the same page on what to do in case we do have a breakthrough” Keller said.  The Ohio EPA said the state has taken several steps this year to aid water quality in Lake Erie, including:

·         Banning open lake dumping of dredged soil by 2020

·         Banning farmers from putting manure or fertilizer on snow-covered, frozen or rain-saturated ground in Lake Erie’s western drainage basin

·         Stepping up efforts to curb phosphorus discharges from wastewater treatment plants

·         Requiring mandatory training on the proper application of fertilizer

·         Signing an agreement with Michigan and Ontario to reduce phosphorus in Lake Erie by 40 percent

In addition, the state EPA and state health department recently announced $1 million of grants to seven Ohio counties in northwest and north-central Ohio to fix leaky private septic tank systems. Erie County’s health department received $70,000 of that money.