

Algae bloom raises concerns in Fontenelle

By JEFF GEARINO

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GREEN RIVER -- Anglers should be OK to catch and eat fish, but waterfowl hunters around Fontenelle Reservoir this weekend might want to watch their dogs carefully, according to wildlife officials.

State and federal officials are closely watching an unusual blue-green algae growth in the small, popular reservoir, located in the corner of Lincoln County about 24 miles southeast of LaBarge.

Officials said some algae species can release toxins that are potentially harmful to humans and animals. The algae can also produce odors and may actually look reddish-brown, as well as bright green or blue-green.

U.S. Bureau of Reclamation officials are recommending people, pets and livestock stay out of the reservoir's water until testing this week determines if the algae is producing harmful toxins.

"Algae is always present to some extent in the reservoir, but we're seeing a much greater presence this year due to the conditions that exist, which have combined to enhance the growth," BuRec Upper Colorado Region spokeswoman Lisa Iams said in a phone interview Thursday.

"At this point, we're just trying to determine if the presence of this additional algae includes those varieties that can release toxins," she said. "We anticipate those results will be back by the first part of next week."

Regardless of the test results, Iams said the agency expects "Mother Nature" will take care of the algae problem in the next few weeks.

"We anticipate a natural die-off process will start in the not-too-distant future, when the water temperatures cool down," she said.

"But if toxins have been produced ... they would remain and at that point would be a concern for several weeks after, until they start to dissipate in the reservoir."

Iams said testing on water released from the reservoir below the dam into the Green River showed no presence of algae. She said the algae bloom poses no danger to the city of Green River's water supply.

Not toxic to fish

Located on the Green River off of U.S. Highway 189, Fontenelle Reservoir was created in 1965. It sits at a 6,500-foot elevation and has a surface area of just over 8,000 acres. It's 20 miles long when full and has about 56 miles of shoreline.

The reservoir is capable of storing up to 222,000 acre feet of water, but is currently only about 56 percent full, according to BuRec figures.

Wyoming Game and Fish Department fish biologist Robb Keith said his office has been "inundated" with calls from area anglers about the effects of the bloom on the reservoir's fisheries.

Keith said studies have shown blue-green algae are not toxic to fish and do not accumulate in fish.

He said there should be "no impacts" to the reservoir's rainbow, brown and cutthroat trout populations and other fish. But he still advised anglers to only eat fish that appear healthy.

"With the fishing, there should be no problem," he said. "But people should make sure the fish are behaving normally, and that they smell normal and they look normal."

Fred Pflughoft with the Great Outdoor Shop in Pinedale said algae blooms have been a common occurrence in some Sublette County waters this year.

"With this warmer weather and the way the weather conditions have been ... we've seen a lot of algae even in the high lakes here," he said in a phone interview. "Things happen when the weather gets a little screwy."

He said fish generally live below the algae bloom, which normally occurs on the surface.

"It does cut down on some of the sunlight getting to the lower depths, but it's not really a big thing in terms of fishing," Pflughoft said. "If it gets too thick, though, it will choke off the oxygen content, and you can get a fish kill if you get too much of it."

Keith said Saturday is the opening of waterfowl season, and hunters will be shooting ducks and geese around the reservoir.

"Hunters will be out in their waders, so that's not going to be a really big deal, but I'm concerned about those dogs they're using to retrieve the waterfowl," he said.

"All that hunting will be going on right on the shoreline," Keith said. "We've been getting a pile of calls from anglers, but I'm not sure waterfowl hunters have thought about it. They should be real cautious about taking their dogs around the reservoir."

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