

# Toxic algae returns to Caloosahatchee

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By Jeremy Cox

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A toxic strain of blue-green algae has returned to the Caloosahatchee River, renewing questions about what's making the river turn green in the summer.

Bright green splotches dot the river as far downstream as downtown Fort Myers.

Scientists dispute whether the outbreak, which first appeared in early June, is getting stronger or weaker. But they agree that the right elements are in place for the algae to flourish—warm water, lots of sunlight and a wealth of nutrients.

The outbreak is the second in as many years for the Caloosahatchee, but it is connected to strikingly different circumstances from the first.

When the neon-green blemishes appeared last year, environmental advocates pointed their fingers at the nutrient-loaded discharges being sent down the river from Lake Okeechobee. This year, the outbreak followed a relatively quiet discharge period.

"However, all the releases they did before didn't just disappear," said Keith Kibbey, manager of Lee County Environmental Lab, adding that last year's nutrients might have settled into the river bottom.

An alternative theory points to recent rains washing fertilizer off the citrus groves, cattle pastures and lawns that line the river.

"Whether (the nutrients) came from the watershed or Lake Okeechobee itself, those are the things we're looking at," Kibbey said.

A new Lee County blue-green algae monitoring program indicates that the bloom might be dissipating. For the past few weeks, county parks employees have been conducting visual surveys of the river roughly every day at 10 sites between Alva and its mouth.

Each employee reports whether the algae is light, medium or heavy based on a color scale, said Kibbey, who is collecting the survey data. Since the program started, the river's general condition has been upgraded from a heavy infestation to light.

If the blue-green algae is releasing its hold, it didn't seem that way to hydrologist Greg Rawl, who flew over the river last week.

"We're just kind of at the beginning of the season. It's going to get a lot more intense," Rawl said, adding that the intensity will depend on how much polluted lake water gets sent down the river.

John Cassani, a scientist with Lee County Hyacinth Control, said he is surprised that blue-green algae is afflicting the Caloosahatchee for the second year in a row.

"I don't know if it's a residual effect from last year or what," he said. "Conditions appear to be right for the (algae)."

Blue-green algae, also called microcystis, can cause skin rashes and severe stomach problems when ingested. People and animals should not swim in or drink water from affected areas.

The Lee County Health Department received a deluge of complaints from residents during last year's algae takeover. This year, there have been two both upstream of the Franklin Lock and at the end of dead-end canals, said J. Robert South, biological administrator for the health department.