

Algae stirs up stink in NFM canal



Blue-green algae collects in the canal of North Fort Myers resident Diann Swasey on Tuesday, July 25.

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The canal behind Diann Swasey's home looks as if someone dumped lime- and turquoise-colored paints in it.

It looks pretty, but the piercing musty smell lets everyone know this water has a big problem.

About two weeks ago, a blue-green tide floated in the canal from the Caloosahatchee River and stopped in the slow-moving water along Swasey's North Fort Myers home.

And it's been there ever since, choking off the underwater life and keeping Swasey and her husband, Lester Canady, indoors, away from the stench.

"It's just horrible," Swasey said Tuesday. "I know I'm not an expert, but water doesn't look like that."

Rhonda Haag, service center director for the South Florida Water Management District, said her office has been keeping its eye on blue-green algae masses in the Caloosahatchee recently, but most of it is still too far upstream to affect Fort Myers.

Last year, large freshwater releases from nutrient-rich Lake Okeechobee were linked to the massive amounts of algae found in area waters.

This year, that's not the case, Haag said.

The water management district releases large amounts of water from the lake when its levels are too high. The agency releases much smaller volumes, called pulse releases, to help keep the estuary's freshwater level in balance.

There have been no large water releases since April and none of the smaller releases in the past two weeks, Haag said.

Last year, Swasey's backyard canal also was covered with blue-green algae. It lasted more than two months.

"It was only green," she said. "It didn't smell good, but it wasn't as bad as it is now."

Swasey and Canady moved to Florida from Virginia in 2000 for the warmer weather.

At first, the house with the glistening canal seemed perfect.

"We used to have manatees back here. We could set crab traps," she said. "There's nothing living in there now, not for two years. Nothing can live here."

Swasey points out that every so often a couple of fish jump through the blue-green mass and then fall back into it.

"They can't breathe," Swasey said. "There's no oxygen. They're trying to gasp for air."

Algae blooms can cause problems with drinking water and can kill underwater life and domestic animals that drink the water. The blooms can also cause skin or respiratory irritation.

In the past year, Swasey and her husband have built an addition to their home, constructed a sea wall against the canal and beautified their back yard.

"We put a lot of money into this place and can't even use it," she said. "I didn't know this was going to happen or we wouldn't have come to Fort Myers."

Swasey said she has respiratory problems and doesn't want to breathe outside much.

"With that kind of an odor out there, you don't know what you're breathing in," she said. "I can't leave the dog out there."

Swasey said if Lake Okeechobee releases aren't the cause, something else needs to be regulated.

"Somebody's putting something in that river," she said.

Haag suspects a main cause for the algae is water runoff from the thousands of local residents who regularly fertilize and water their lawns.

"There's so many people here in a limited system," she said.

Haag said everyone can help limit runoff by closely following directions to fertilize their lawn and restricting their lawn watering.

"It's an unfortunate situation," Haag said. "I know it's not pleasant."

Bob South, an epidemiologist with the Lee County Health Department, said this summer, his office has only received a couple of calls about blue-green algae, both in dead-end or slow-moving canals.

"The thing that they have to realize is that this is naturally occurring. It's nothing that somebody else does," he said. "It's Mother Nature and the good Lord, that's who to blame."

South said there is no need to report blue-green algae to the health department, but the problem hasn't spread much this year. He advises people who have the problem to stay indoors and not to let pets drink the water.

Blue-green algae cannot be treated, so Swasey will just have to wait it out, something that does not make her happy. "This shouldn't be happening," she said. "This is not normal."