

ONE HUNDRED THIRTEENTH CONGRESS
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Statement of Rep. Henry A. Waxman
Ranking Member, Committee on Energy and Commerce
Hearing on “Cyanotoxins in Drinking Water”
Subcommittee on Environment and the Economy
November 19, 2014

Today’s hearing focuses on a growing public health threat, cyanotoxins in drinking water. Harmful algal blooms can grow out of control in our nation’s waterways, posing risks to those who drink, swim, or even fish in contaminated water. If these blooms are blue-green algae, also called cyanobacteria, they produce toxins called cyanotoxins.

Cyanotoxins can cause a long list of health impacts: liver damage, skin and eye irritation, gastrointestinal illness, neurological effects, cancer, paralysis and death. And exposure to these toxins can occur through direct contact, drinking contaminated water, consumption of contaminated fish, and inhalation of aerosolized toxins.

Every year, toxins released from algal blooms prompt seasonal closures of shellfisheries around the Pacific, Gulf, and Atlantic coasts in the United States.

The toxins are also a serious issue in the Great Lakes. This year, the toxins forced the closure of a major drinking water system, leaving 500,000 people in the city of Toledo unable to use their tap water for two days. The water was not safe, even for bathing, and boiling it would do nothing to remove the toxins.

There are important steps Congress should be taking to address this threat. We need to provide more resources to EPA. EPA doesn’t have the resources it needs to monitor the extent

of the contamination, develop health advisories and drinking water standards, or provide technical assistance to states and drinking water systems.

We also need to reauthorize the State Revolving Fund to get resources to affected utilities. And we should speed research into testing methods and treatment techniques.

But we must also address the root causes of these algal blooms, and one of them is climate change.

Water temperature is a key factor in the growth of harmful algal blooms, and climate change has already lengthened the bloom season. Warming waters, elevated carbon dioxide levels, and acidification all provide a competitive advantage to harmful algae over other organisms, leading to greater frequency and intensity of blooms.

Climate change has also increased extreme weather events, which create favorable conditions for algal blooms. Heavy precipitation and flooding increase nutrient runoff and pollution. In droughts, lower water levels can concentrate nutrients and allow them to stay in the water longer, enhancing the conditions favorable to algal growth. Droughts have also increased salinity in freshwater ecosystems, allowing toxic marine algae to move to inland waters.

A recent report by Smithsonian researchers found that climate change has exacerbated the harmful algal bloom problem – in fact, they found that the effect of climate change on harmful algal blooms has been grossly underestimated.

Our first step must be to stop denying the facts and to stop underestimating the impacts of climate change. It may be politically convenient to deny climate change is real. Science deniers don't have to cut emissions or make hard choices. And they don't have to take on the biggest polluters in the country, whose efforts to sow confusion and doubt have been determined, sophisticated, and well-funded.

But denying climate change is irresponsible and reckless. We have a window in which we can act. If we don't act, algal blooms and so many other problems caused by climate change will grow worse.

And history will look back at this Congress with shame and embarrassment and ask why we failed to heed the warnings of scientists.