

Contamination leaves 400,000 Ohioans without tap water

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On Sunday, residents of Toledo, Ohio were told not to drink the city's water for a second day after city officials warned of a dangerous algae bloom contaminating the city's water supply.

The city's 400,000 residents have been avoiding tap water and relying on bottled water and emergency supplies. Officials say that boiling tap water in this case only increases its toxicity level. It is not considered safe to brush one's teeth with the water and unhealthy individuals have been warned not even to let it touch their skin.

Officials say that the water is contaminated with microcystins, a toxin caused by algae blooms. Drinking water contaminated with the toxin can cause liver and nervous system damage. According to "ABC News," those affected show flu-like symptoms such as vomiting, diarrhea, nausea, numbness and dizziness.

The city draws its water from the southwestern part of Lake Erie, the fourth largest of the Great Lakes and the eleventh largest lake in the world. This section of the lake is going through a harmful algal bloom (HAB). The bloom is big enough that it can be seen from space. Such blooms are often caused by poorly disposed of agricultural and industrial waste products.

Local TV station ABC 13 explained, "HABs occur when excess nitrogen and phosphorous are present in lakes and stream. Such nutrients can come from runoff of over-fertilized fields and lawns, from malfunctioning septic systems and from livestock pens." "ABC News" said that bottled water was "flying off of the shelves" in Toledo and that there were long lines at distribution centers throughout the city. Video footage showed large groups of residents waiting around at those centers for the arrival of emergency water. One woman interviewed by the station said that she had spent the morning "looking for water." She told the interviewer,

"there was no water on the north side of Toledo."

One resident, Aundrea Simmons, described her experience to the Associated Press while standing in line at a pharmacy for water, "It looked like Black Friday." She worried, "I have children and elderly parents. They take their medication with water." Another resident, Monica Morales told *AP* that one store's entire bottled water supply was bought out within 30 minutes of opening. The wire service noted that stores as far as 50 miles away from Toledo reported water shortages.

Ohio Governor John Kasich has declared a state of emergency in response to the crisis. This has allowed the governor to call in the National Guard to help distribute water. Kasich also asked grocery outlets to redirect bottled water to northwestern Ohio to prevent shortages.

Toxin levels are reported to have dropped slightly in the water. Officials are testing the water regularly. Kasich commented, however, that he did not yet know how long the warning would be in effect.

HABs are a growing problem on Lake Erie. In recent years there has been a bloom each summer. This year, experts had predicted the bloom to occur in September and had not expected it so early. A *New York Times* article on the subject reports that the lake is so "sick" that a sixth of the 9,910 square mile surface area was covered in 2011 by algae.

Jeff Reutter, director of the Ohio Sea Grant research lab, told *AP* that "Weather conditions made it such that [this year's] bloom was going right into the water intakes." Reutter said that each year the amount of phosphorous dumped into the lake increases. Concerning the pollution, he told the news service "We're right back to where we were in the '70s."

Lake Erie provides drinking water to 11 million

people, including the 400,000 residents of Toledo. The crisis prompted Chicago to re-test its water supply, even though it does not get its water from Lake Erie. Also, Detroit is scheduled to reevaluate its water contamination process Monday, though that city also does not get its water from the lake.

Earlier this year, 300,000 residents of Charleston, West Virginia had their water contaminated due to a toxic chemical spill. In some places residents could not use the water for 10 days.



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