

Health officials: Avoid fishing, swimming in Caloosahatchee due to toxic algae bloom

By Chad Gillis

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A toxic algae bloom that can cause fish kills and harm humans and animals has shown up in recent water quality tests conducted on the Caloosahatchee River in Fort Myers.

Lee County Department of Health officials on Tuesday sent out a precautionary warning, urging people to avoid fishing, swimming or boating on the popular waterway for at least the next week.

Blue-green algae, or cyanobacteria, was detected this week by water quality monitoring stations. Further testing will be needed to determine if the bloom is large enough to cause harm to humans or livestock.

“Sometimes it reaches toxic levels,” said Diane Holm, a health department spokeswoman. “We’re recommending people not eat (any fish they catch) as a precaution.”

The caution will remain in place for at least a week. Water quality samples were taken in the river on Tuesday, Holm said.

Exposure to blue-green algae can cause symptoms in humans, including skin irritation, stomach cramps, vomiting, nausea, diarrhea, fever, sore throat, headache, muscle and joint pain, blisters of the mouth and liver damage. Swimmers in water containing cyanobacterial toxins may suffer allergic reactions, such as asthma, eye irritation, rashes, and blisters around the mouth and nose, according to the health department.

Blue-green algae blooms in the Caloosahatchee are typically triggered by too little water flow from Lake Okeechobee. Although the river and lake were

connected during and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers drainage project, the Caloosahatchee is now dependant on Lake Okeechobee releases.

When lake levels drop, typically in the later part of the dry season and into June, water becomes a stagnant breeding ground for the toxic algae.

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