

INDIAN RIVER LAGOON

Lyngbya algal bloom in Indian River Lagoon cakes Oslo Road boat ramp near Vero Beach

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Foul-smelling and potentially harmful algae has blanketed an Indian River County boat ramp and stopped a kids summer camp from launching kayaks there over the weekend.

Lyngbya was the "dominant species" found in the algae bloom at the Oslo Road boat ramp south of Vero Beach, said Malcolm McFarland, a research associate at Florida Atlantic University's Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institute in Fort Pierce.

Harbor Branch researchers who took water samples Friday are awaiting test results to determine whether and how much lyngbyatoxin it contains. The toxin can cause skin and respiratory issues such as itchy rashes, irritation and redness.

"It's best to be cautious and use common sense and try to avoid contact with these big, stinky algal mats," McFarland said.

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The Florida Department of Health office in Indian River County advises people who come in contact with lyngbya to wash with soap and water. The department also advises against drinking the water and allowing pets near such potentially harmful algae.

"If you don't know what it is, don't wander in it," said Charles Vogt, an environmental specialist. "That's kind of the universal logic."

What is lyngbya and is it dangerous?

The brown, stringy, fluffy algae that resembles poop and smells like rotten eggs can bloom in the Indian River Lagoon when water temperatures rise and nutrients, such as nitrogen and phosphorus from fertilizer runoff, feed it.

Though it is a type of cyanobacteria, it's different than and unrelated to the blue-green algae polluting Lake Okeechobee, which contains a more dangerous toxin called microcystin.

While it's common to find lyngbya in the lagoon, especially in summer, it's abnormal to see such a high concentration of it, McFarland said. It usually grows in a mass along the bottom and floats to the surface as it starts to die and decompose.

Wind causes it to clump together along the shoreline. As it decays, it produces a "mix of a whole bunch of volatile compounds," including hydrogen sulfide, McFarland said.

It also robs the water of oxygen. Water samples taken Sunday showed 0.5 parts per million of dissolved oxygen, according to Indian Riverkeeper Mike Conner. The healthy range for sustaining most aquatic life is between 4 and 7 parts per million, he said.

"I got my out of my car about 40 yards from the spot and the smell about knocked me over," said Conner, who broadcast his visit to the boat ramp live on social media Sunday. "You would think there's been a massive fish kill, that's how bad it smells."

People should avoid contact with algae in Indian River Lagoon

The north-central section of the 156-mile-long lagoon, which runs through five counties from Volusia to Palm Beach, has seen some clearer water over the last few months. But

clear water doesn't necessarily mean a healthy habitat, environmental groups such as the nonprofit Marine Resources Council often remind the public.

Instead of the clear or tannic water Pelican Island Audubon Society President Richard Baker expected to see at the boat ramp Friday, his summer camp group was greeted by a dark blanket of putrid sludge.

"I have never seen the water like that at that site," said Baker, who has led kayak trips in Indian River County for nearly four decades. "I canceled because I didn't want the kids to get in that horrible-looking water."

The group relocated to a clearer launching point, but Conner said he saw a dog jump in the water and several kayakers launch from there Sunday. Some used rags to cover their noses to avoid the smell.

Conner said he used it as an opportunity to educate them on the potential human health risks of being exposed to potentially harmful algal blooms.

"I said, 'I wouldn't be here. There's better places to hangout, man,' " he said.

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