



Technical Contact: Bonnie Widerburg, DHS, 971-673-0976
Media Contact: Jodi Sherwood, DHS, 503-945-6651
Sue Olson, US Forest Service, 541-383-5561

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Public health advisory issued for Wickiup Reservoir

A health advisory prompted by high algae levels found in Wickiup Reservoir, 40 miles southwest of Bend in the Cascade Mountains, was issued today by the Oregon Department of Human Services (DHS) and the Deschutes County Health Department.

Water monitoring has confirmed the presence of blue-green algae that can produce toxins harmful to humans and animals, said Bonnie Widerburg, health educator in the Harmful Algae Bloom Surveillance program in DHS.

These algae levels are likely to be associated with dangerous toxin concentrations in the water, according to World Health Organization guidelines.

Swallowing or inhaling water droplets should be avoided, as well as skin contact with water by humans or animals. Drinking water from Wickiup Reservoir is especially dangerous. Widerburg advised campers and other visitors that toxins cannot be removed by boiling, filtering or treating the water.

People who draw in-home water directly from an algae bloom-affected water body are advised to use an alternative water source. If their drinking water supplier draws from an affected water source, they may want to ask if the water has been tested. If the supplier has not tested the water, DHS recommends using another water source not affected by the bloom.

DHS recommends that people who choose to eat fish from waters where algae blooms are present should remove all fat, skin and organs before cooking since toxins are more likely to collect in these tissues.

Additionally, DHS advises that people should not eat crayfish or freshwater shellfish harvested from Wickiup Reservoir while this advisory is in effect.

Exposure to toxins can produce symptoms of numbness, tingling and dizziness that can lead to difficulty breathing or heart problems and require immediate medical attention. Symptoms of skin irritation, weakness, diarrhea, nausea, cramps and fainting should also receive medical attention if they persist or worsen. Children and pets are particularly susceptible.

The public will be advised when the concern no longer exists.

With proper precautions to avoid water contact, people are encouraged to visit Wickiup Reservoir and enjoy activities such as camping, hiking, biking, picnicking, catch-and-release fishing and bird watching. Boating is safe as long as speeds do not create excessive water spray, which could lead to inhalation risk.

For local information contact the Deschutes National Forest at 541-383-5300 or www.fs.fed.us/r6/centraloregon/.

For health information, contact Bonnie Widerburg, HABS program public health educator, 971-673-0976 or www.oregon.gov/DHS/ph/hab; also the DHS toll-free information line at 1-877-290-6767, or Shannon Dames, Deschutes County Health Department (541) 322 - 7410.