

News release

July 11, 2011

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Oregon Public Health Division issues advisory for Willow Creek Reservoir

High algae levels found in Morrow County Willow Creek Reservoir

A health advisory prompted by high algae levels found in Willow Creek Reservoir, located near Heppner, Ore., was issued today by Oregon Health Authority's Public Health Division and Morrow County Health Department officials.

Water monitoring has confirmed the presence of blue-green algae that can produce toxins harmful to humans and animals. 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 Willow Creek Reservoir is especially dangerous. Oregon Public Health officials advise campers and other Willow Creek Reservoir visitors that toxins cannot be removed by boiling, filtering or treating the water with camping-style filters.

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People who draw in-home water directly from Willow Creek Reservoir are advised to use an alternative water source because private treatment systems are not proven effective in removing algae toxins. However, public drinking water systems can reduce algae toxins through proper filtration and disinfection. If people on public water systems have questions about treatment and testing, they should contact their water supplier.

Oregon health officials recommend 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, public health officials advise that people should not eat freshwater clams from Willow Creek Reservoir. Crayfish muscle can be eaten, but internal organs and liquid fat should be discarded.

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 Willow Creek 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 U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' Willow Creek Natural Resource Management Office at 541-676-9009.

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For health information, contact the Harmful Algae Bloom Surveillance (HABS) program at 971-673-0400 or www.healthoregon.org/hab; also contact the Oregon Public Health Division toll-free information line at 1-877-290-6767 or Morrow County Health Department at 541-676-5421.

The HABS program maintains a current list of all health advisories on its Website. To find out if an advisory has been issued or lifted for a specific water body, visit www.healthoregon.org/hab and click on “Current Lake Conditions.”

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The Oregon Health Authority is at the forefront of lowering and containing costs, improving quality and increasing access to health care in order to improve the lifelong health of Oregonians.