

TULSA DISTRICT (SWT) COMMUNICATIONS PLAN
Blue-green algae warnings and advisories in Tulsa District Lakes

PURPOSE: This plan will be used to assist SWT in carrying out an effective communication strategy regarding blue-green algae blooms at Tulsa District lakes in Oklahoma and Texas. Communication for Kansas lakes will be deferred to the KDHE.

SITUATION: High levels of blue-green algae were discovered in several Corps-managed lakes in Oklahoma in 2011. These lakes were Fort Gibson, Tenkiller, Eufaula, Keystone, Skiatook, Waurika, and Lake Texoma. Because of the potential risks to public safety, the Tulsa District issued advisories and warnings discouraging or prohibiting water contact at these reservoirs. At some lakes, certain areas and swim beaches were closed completely. Although blue-green algae is present in all lakes and high levels have been discovered in the past in Tulsa District lakes, there has not been an outbreak in as many lakes at the same time as in 2011, likely due to the unusually hot, dry summer. The impacts to recreation and businesses at these lakes caused a high level of public and media interest. Based on historical data, this is likely an event that will occur again.

COMMUNICATIONS OBJECTIVES:

1. Communicate the BGA policy and execution plan with appropriate internal audiences to make them informed, effective force multipliers. (Command Information)
2. Coordinate with appropriate congressional offices and local elected officials. (Congressional Liaison)
3. Communicate with business owners around affected lake. (Stakeholder Relations)
4. Communicate any advisories or warnings with the general public through the mass media, website, phone system, and social media. (Public Information)
5. Communicate consistently and concisely across communication platforms.

ISSUES:

1. Loss of revenue and substantial impact to businesses.
2. Impact to recreation.
3. Corps of Engineers testing methods: cell densities vs. toxin levels.

POTENTIAL STAKEHOLDERS:

1. Congressional delegation and elected officials
2. Business owners around the lakes
3. Concerned members of the public

NOTIFICATIONS:

1. Congressional (e-mail or phone)
2. Business owners
3. Public notification
4. News Release to local media outlets

COMMUNICATION ROLLOUT:

Planning and Environmental Division (PE) and Operations Division (OD-NR) are the team leaders for communications of the blue-green algae issue. PE will ensure that the actions detailed below take place. Spokespersons will include Planning, Operations (OD-NR), and PAO employees as well as all OD personnel who communicate with the public. All potential spokespersons will familiarize themselves with the policy, key messages, talking points, and Q&As.

Once plan is approved/finalized

What?	How?	Who?	When?
Prepare OD field office staffs	Ops meetings	Lake Managers	T-
Educate General Workforce	Team Page	PAO	T-
Educate business owners on policy	Fact sheets	PAO/Lake Managers	T-

Once advisory/warning issued

Notify Congressional offices	Phone/e-mail	Lake Managers	Target
Inform Business Owners	Phone/e-mail	Lake Managers	T
Inform General Public	Automated phone message	Lake Managers	T
Inform General Public	News Release & Social Media	PAO	T
Inform General Public	Presentations to Community Groups	Lake managers	T+

TACTICS

1. Once policy is approved and finalized

- A. Inform potential spokespersons and OD field staffs
- B. Create awareness of policy internally through teampage and Pacesetter articles.
- C. Create fact sheets about policy and distribute to local businesses around lakes.
- D. Lake managers and staff should brief stakeholder of policy through presentations to community groups, phone calls to local leaders, etc.
- E. News release regarding policy sent to media outlets and posted to social media sites.
- F. Create blue-green algae webpage on external website with fact sheets about policy. ***Once web migration occurs***

2. Once an advisory/warning is issued.

- A. Congressional offices should be notified for any advisory or warnings or updates/end to the advisories and warnings.
- B. Businesses should be notified by lake staff.
- C. The automated phone system will be updated with an option for blue-green algae report at the local lake if

applicable. A phone number similar to the lake conditions number shall be created and updated with an automated message with any BGA advisories and warnings.

D. A news release will be sent to local media and posted on social media sites for the initial notification, for any updates and at the end of the advisories and warnings.

E. The blue-green algae page on the district website will be updated with the locations and data from all test sites including an interpretation of the data.

F. District and lake office staff will coordinate through the District Public Affairs Office, response to any speaker requests regarding blue-green algae.

G. All messaging and external communications documents both print, broadcast or web will be written and/or approved by public affairs prior to distribution.

KEY MESSAGES:

1. We want to provide the safest possible recreation opportunities to the public.
2. Blue-green algae are present in all lakes, but during certain conditions can become concentrated at levels which can cause adverse health effects to people and pets.
3. Some but not all blue-green algae blooms produce nerve and liver toxins, which are extremely dangerous, but most produce skin toxins which may cause rash, nausea, diarrhea, vomiting, upper respiratory symptoms, and other flu-like symptoms.
4. Children, pets, and individuals susceptible to illness or rash are most likely to be affected by blue-green algae.
5. Our goal is to provide as much information as possible so that individuals can make the best possible decision for themselves and their families.
6. Reservoirs with advisories or warnings are NOT closed. Boating and swimming are still permitted and businesses are still open. Visitors are encouraged to enjoy the lake, but be aware of the potential risk associated with primary body contact with the water.

TALKING POINTS:

1. This is not a new occurrence in the Tulsa District. There have been reported algal blooms in several Tulsa District reservoirs in the past including R.S. Kerr Reservoir and Lake Texoma in Oklahoma and Marion Reservoir in Kansas. In 2011, it was an unusual summer because of the amount of reservoirs affected and the severity of those blooms.
2. Recent research has helped scientists to better understand the health risks associated with blue-green algae. Prior to this research not much was known. In 2003, the World Health Organization established the guidelines for safe levels of BGA in recreational waters. These guidelines are widely accepted as the testing guidelines for determining acceptable levels in recreational waters such as the reservoirs managed by the Tulsa District.
3. The WHO guidelines are based on cell counts. While there are tests available that examine the amount of toxins produced, there aren't any widely accepted guidelines that establish safe levels of toxins for recreational waters. In addition, these tests can measure liver and nerve toxins but there aren't any tests that measure levels of skin toxins, which most BGA produce.
4. We will begin posting all data from all sample locations on our website after a blue-green algae bloom has been confirmed. We intend to provide as much information as available so that visitors can make an informed decision about recreating at a reservoir affected by BGA.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS:

Q1. What are blue-green algae and why should I care?

A1. Blue-green algae are a type of bacteria present in all lakes, but during certain conditions can become concentrated at levels which can cause adverse health effects to people and pets. Some but not all blue-green algae blooms produce nerve and liver toxins, which are extremely dangerous, but most produce skin toxins which can cause rash, nausea, diarrhea, vomiting, upper respiratory symptoms, and other flu-like symptoms. Individuals recreating at reservoirs with elevated BGA levels should take precautions to minimize their exposure to high levels of BGA and be aware of the levels present so that they can make an informed decision.

Q2. Why is the Corps of Engineers testing for blue-green algae now but haven't in the past?

A2. Blue-green algae have been around for millions of years, but scientific research on the effects of BGA is relatively new. In fact, the World Health Organization's guidelines were only created in 2003. We have tested for BGA in several reservoirs in our district in past years, however, the extreme heat and dry conditions seen in summer 2011 combined with nutrients coming into the lake from stream run-off caused algal blooms in several reservoirs simultaneously. During this time, the public became more vigilant of blue-green algae which led to more reported blooms and further testing.

Q3. How does the Corps of Engineers determine which lakes to test?

A3. Typically, we rely on reports from members of the public or lake staff. Once we receive a report of a possible blue-green algae bloom, project staff collects samples for analysis. Once results are received, a determination is made based on the World Health Organization Guidelines as to whether an advisory or warning is needed.

Q4. The World Health Organization's guidelines are based on cell counts not toxin levels. Aren't the toxins what should matter?

A4. Though there are tests for liver and nerve toxin production currently there are no tests for skin toxins, which all types of BGA are considered to produce. These skin toxins can cause rash, upper respiratory illness, gastrointestinal illness and other flu-like symptoms. These can especially impact people with pre-existing health issues, children, and pets.

Since the Corps of Engineers strives to provide the safest possible recreational opportunities and it is our due diligence to let the public know of ANY potential effects of BGA, the advisory is still in place. The advisory means water contact is discouraged. It doesn't mean that you cannot go into the water, but based on the information provided you must make the best decision for you and your family.

Q5. The Grayson County Health Department says the water is fine. Why should I listen to the Corps of Engineers?

A5. In the absence of approved response plans by the State of Oklahoma and the State of Texas to inform the public of potential risks associated with recreating lakes affected by

harmful algae blooms the Tulsa District has relied upon guidelines established in 2003 by the World Health Organization.

We use the World Health Organization's guidelines, which are based on cell counts per milliliter of water. These guidelines were created for recreational waters, which includes Texoma and other Corps lakes in the Tulsa District.

Grayson County tests for liver and nerve toxin production, however, currently there are no tests for skin toxins, which all types of BGA are considered to produce. These skin toxins can cause rash, upper respiratory illness, gastrointestinal illness and other flu-like symptoms. These can especially impact people with pre-existing health issues, children, and pets.

Since the Corps of Engineers strives to provide the safest possible recreational opportunities and it is our due diligence to let the public know of ANY potential effects of BGA so that members of the public can make the best decision for themselves and their family.

Q6. Is the Corps of Engineers intentionally trying to destroy businesses?

A6. Public safety is a top priority for the Corps of Engineers. While we understand that the advisories and warnings may have negative impacts to businesses, it is our due diligence to let the public know of ANY potential risks from BGA so that members of the public can make the best decisions for themselves and their family.

Q7. Why do the warnings say that water contact is prohibited? Will I get fined if I go into a warning area?

A8. The Corps of Engineers has never actively enforced a water contact prohibition, which was never the intent of the wording. We have changed the warning language from water contact is prohibited to water contact is not recommended to more effectively clarify the intent of the notices. These notices are designed to inform the public of the risks of BGA and allow them to make informed decisions about recreating at lakes with blue-green algae blooms.

Q8. What does it take for blue-green algae to go away?

A8. There are many factors that influence the blue-green algae levels. Hot, dry conditions are just one factor. Other factors

include lower lake levels, lack of inflow and nutrients in the water from stream runoff. One or more of these factors can impact the levels of blue-green algae present at any time.

Q9 How often does the Corps test?

A9. Once a blue-green algae bloom is confirmed, we test on a 30-day cycle.

Q10 Where can in find updated information?

A9. We distribute information on our website, www.swt.usace.army.mil, our facebook account, www.facebook.com/usacetulsa, and through the local news media as well as the project offices at each lake.