

BRIAN HIGGINS
26TH DISTRICT, NEW YORK

COMMITTEE ON WAYS AND MEANS
VICE RANKING MEMBER
SUBCOMMITTEE ON HEALTH
SUBCOMMITTEE ON TRADE

COMMITTEE ON THE BUDGET

CO-CHAIR, CANCER CAUCUS

CO-CHAIR, NORTHERN BORDER CAUCUS

CO-CHAIR, REVITALIZING OLDER CITIES
TASK FORCE

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-3226

July 26, 2017

2459 RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING
WASHINGTON, DC 20515
(202) 225-3306
(202) 226-0347 (FAX)

726 EXCHANGE STREET
SUITE 601
BUFFALO, NY 14210
(716) 852-3501
(716) 852-3929 (FAX)

800 MAIN STREET
SUITE 3C
NIAGARA FALLS, NY 14301
(716) 282-1274
(716) 282-2479 (FAX)
higgins.house.gov

The Honorable Scott Pruitt
Administrator
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
1200 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20460

Dear Administrator Pruitt,

As algal blooms begin to emerge in Lake Erie, I write to urge you to immediately dedicate the necessary resources and prioritization to the position of Harmful Algal Bloom Coordinator, to ensure that the Coordinator is able to effectively manage Great Lakes Restoration Initiative activities to combat this ongoing public health, environmental and economic threat.

Earlier this week, the National Atmospheric and Oceanic Administration (NOAA) reported the presence of harmful algal blooms in western Lake Erie for the first time this summer, extending into the basin from the Maumee Watershed and Sandusky Bay respectively. Forecasts from NOAA indicate that western Lake Erie will experience a particularly severe harmful algal bloom this season, rivaling levels not seen since 2013 and 2014.

While the problem of algal blooms in Lake Erie had largely been mitigated by the 1980s, a resurgence has occurred in recent years, culminating in the worst ever algal bloom on the lake in the summer of 2011, covering approximately 1,930 square miles. And in August of 2014, a two day drinking ban was issued in Toledo, Ohio for nearly half a million residents after microcystin, a dangerous toxin produced by algal blooms, was discovered in the water supply. This represented the first time such an order had been issued for a large city due to algae-related toxins.

In addition to contaminating drinking water, algal blooms also rob the water of oxygen that fish and other aquatic species need to survive, negatively impacting the associated fishing industry and limiting the recreational use of the waterways. As the shallowest and warmest of the Great Lakes, Lake Erie has proven especially vulnerable to algal blooms.

The increasing prevalence of algal blooms in Lake Erie is being fueled by the excessive loading of nutrients, namely phosphorus and nitrogen, due to agricultural runoff from the application of manure and chemical fertilizers. Leaving these threats unaddressed will lead to the degradation of the Great Lakes ecosystem.

In Buffalo, our waterfront is inextricably linked to the health of Lake Erie and its restoration has helped leverage millions of dollars in public and private investment, fostering increased access to the water's edge. Consequently, the specter of increased algal blooms would threaten the progress we are making towards reclaiming our waterfront as an engine of recreational and economic activity. While the threat has primarily afflicted western Lake Erie, blooms have been observed as little as 90 miles way in Presque Isle Bay in Erie, Pennsylvania.

In recognition of the serious threat that algal blooms pose, Congress included a provision requiring that the Administrator designate a Harmful Algal Bloom Coordinator in its authorization of the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, contained in the Water Infrastructure Improvements for the Nation Act (P.L. 114-322).

I am aware that the Director of the Great Lakes National Program Office, Tinka Hyde, has been designated as HAB Coordinator, but I am concerned that additional resources have yet to be provided for the Director to effectively coordinate these duties. To that end, I urge you to immediately dedicate additional resources to this position, and ensure it is given the level attention that is commensurate with the threat it poses. Furthermore, I ask that you provide information on the steps that will be taken to ensure the Coordinator has the tools to fulfill this mandate. Thank you for your time and attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Brian Higgins
Member of Congress

CC:Tinka Hyde
Director
Great Lakes National Program Office
77 West Jackson Boulevard
Chicago, IL 60604-3590