Toxic blue-green algae detected in Trinity River

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Less than a month after the state issued a health hazard warning of toxic blue-green algae blooming on the Klamath River, the Humboldt County Department of Health and Human Services has made a similar warning after detecting low levels of toxins at a popular Trinity River swimming spot.

"It's up to the users to exercise their level of comfort and caution in the river. We're just educating them on the risks that are posed," department Division of Environmental Health Director Melissa Martel said.

The samples were taken from a popular swimming area at Kimtu Park near Willow Creek, which found the presence of toxins produced of blue-green algae.

Martel said it is very common for the algae to show up during this time of year, but said the ongoing statewide drought has created optimal conditions for algal blooms to occur.

"Blue-green algae thrives in slower moving water with high temperatures," she said. "With the drought, you're seeing lower water levels, which slows down the water, and the water tends to warm up,"

The initial samples show a low concentration of the toxins at the site, but Kevin Metcalfe, supervising environmental health specialist of the Department of Health and Human Services, said more samples were taken on Wednesday to follow up.

"I would anticipate that additional results will be available next week," he said.

Nearby communities and tribes have been alerted of the recent finding. The Hoopa Valley Tribe's Environmental Program Director Ken Norton said that they have issued their own community advisory and had sent off several samples for testing on Wednesday.

"We have been testing for the presence of microcystin (a toxin produced by blue-green algae) since 2008, and our the latest results were from July 31," he said. "It showed a very minute (amount). With the recent warning from the North Coast Water Board and now this, we have issued a community advisory based on the presence of the blue-green algae."

Metcalfe said microcystin was not detected in the recent sampling, but another toxin called anatoxin was confirmed.

"In general, the blue-green algae may be present in our freshwaters, which is part of our ongoing outreach efforts," he said. "It could be anywhere along the river. Our focus right now is on this particular area."

Blue-green algae may appear as green, blue-green, white or brown scum, foam or mats floating on the water. The department advises the public to consider the risks of exposing themselves to these waters, especially for dogs and children, which are most likely to be affected due to their small body size and tendency to stay in the water for longer periods.

The department recommends the public to follow these guidelines to reduce health risks:

• Keep children, pets and livestock from swimming in or drinking water containing algal scums or mats.

• Adults should also avoid wading and swimming in water containing algal blooms. Try not to swallow or inhale water spray in an algal bloom area.

• If no algal scums or mats are visible, you should still carefully watch young children and warn them not to swallow

any water.

• Fish should be consumed only after removing the guts and liver and rinsing fillets in tap water.

• Never drink, cook with or wash dishes with water from rivers, streams or lakes.

• Get medical attention immediately if you think that you, your pet, or livestock might have been poisoned by blue-green algae toxins. Be sure to tell the doctor about possible contact with blue-green algae.

More information can be found at
http://www.cdph.ca.gov/healthinfo/environhealth/water/Pages/bluegreenalgae.aspx.

Will Houston can be reached at 707-441-0504.