Algae bloom spreads in the Caloosahatchee River

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Three weeks after the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers began releasing Lake Okeechobee water down the Caloosahatchee River, an algae bloom is advancing toward the Gulf of Mexico.

The water lapping around the Alva Boat Ramp is avocado-colored, and upriver, at the Fort Denaud Swing bridge, a 3-foot neon green ribbon extends from the bank toward the middle of the river.

Feds will start to lower Lake O releases Friday

John Cassani of Calusa Waterkeeper says the algae has been blooming patchily in the river for the last few weeks, but has spread in recent days.

"There have been little blooms, but nothing like this so far," Cassani said.

The river's green tinge comes from Cyanobacteria, photosynthesizing microorganisms with no cell nuclei commonly called blue-green algae.

Though these organisms occur naturally in the environment, when they multiply, or "bloom," the health consequences can range from annoying to dangerous

Cyanobacteria toxins can cause symptoms ranging from a runny nose to liver failure — even death, if ingested in large amounts.

And it's not just human health that can suffer; the animals that live in and near water are affected as well.

Too much algae can make the economy queasy, too. In 2016, when algae covered Florida's east coast and stained the Caloosahatchee, Gov. Rick Scott declared a state of emergency. Charter captains and hoteliers reported lowered bookings as some real estate professionals lost sales, blaming the foul water.

This is the first widespread bloom of 2018, but Cassani had seen it coming for a while. "It was just kind of like a powder keg ready to go off," he said. "All the factors were there and then when the Corps increased the flows on June 1, and with the increasing temperature that accelerated the situation, and within the last three, four days, it's just taken off."
Algae bloom spreads in the Caloosahatchee, raising health and wildlife concerns

An aerial shot of the Caloosahatchee's algae bloom shot by Calusa Waterkeeper John Cassani. (Photo: Calusa Waterkeeper John Cassani/special to The News-Press)

The state's response to algae blooms is shared among agencies, including the Departments of Environmental Protection and Health. Cassani said the DEP has started sampling for toxins and one showed toxin levels above what's considered safe for recreation. Calls to the departments were not immediately returned.

Should agencies determine there's a risk to human health, the health department would be responsible for posting warnings signs at beaches or other high-hazard areas.

When Cassani took a reconnaissance flight Friday to get aerial photos of the bloom, he said he saw a boat "pulling a kid on a tube right in the middle of a bloom.

"The problem is, the average citizen just doesn't know what to avoid."