Editorial: Health department ignorant to water crisis

Tom Hayden  Published 2:19 p.m. ET Aug. 21, 2018 | Updated 5:59 p.m. ET Aug. 21, 2018

The Florida Department of Health is failing residents and tourists on many fronts when it comes to massive blue-green algal blooms and the spread of red tide.

The agency - along with the Lee County Health Department which failed to return The News-Press phone calls starting July 27 - waited too long to answer specific questions about the potential short-term and long-term impacts of the toxic algae and red tide. When the health department finally did say something on Aug. 10, its best statement was there is no evidence that acute exposure to the toxins have long-term health impacts.

Health department spokesman Brad Dalton said in an email: "There is no evidence that acute exposures to these toxins have long-term health impacts. Chronic exposures are not a concern with these blooms due to limited exposure potential."

It was an ignorant statement, which has fired up environmentalists, educators and scientists who said the health department is flat wrong. There is research over 20 years to suggest exposure to the blue-green algae could lead to death. There may be no definitive evidence, but there is information to suggest a possibility, like:
A recent local screening of a documentary, called “Toxic Puzzle,” explored a possible link between the algal blooms and ALS, or Lou Gehrig’s disease.

An Ohio State study found people living in areas with prolonged exposure to significant algal blooms can develop a liver disease.

Earlier this month, a British journal concluded a 2016 study of a Florida east coast bloom exposed residents to a lifetime risk of liver cancer.

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The health department should acknowledge these reports, and if the agency believes they are wrong and health risks are low, provide the evidence to support its conclusion.

Most damaging was an agency statement, denying what scientists believe: that more research is needed on long-term health impacts. The health department should be pushing for that research from experts in the fields of cyanotoxins and the impact of the harmful nutrients, like phosphorous and nitrogen, that pour into our waterways mainly from local basin runoff and from Lake Okeechobee discharges.

People near or in the water have complained about burning eyes, sore throats and the inability to breathe in the most severe conditions. Florida Poison Control is getting three times as many calls than it did last year about red tide and almost five times as many calls about the algae.

The health department should be taking the lead on this issue, encouraging corporations and industries to financially support continued research of this environmental menace. The health department should be rallying scientists and environmentalists to continue research and find answers.

We know algae blooms have been a part of Florida’s environmental map for decades as more and more nutrients pound our waterways. We know red tide is not just a natural phenomenon that enveloped us this year; it's been around for hundreds of years.

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We also know the perfect storm of toxic algae and red tide have consumed us this year in ways few can remember. We can’t go to the beach without eyes watering, throats hurting and breathing labored. The stench is so bad, it turns us around and back to land.
Sea life is dying in record numbers, with millions of pounds of dead fish washed onto our beaches, along with hundreds of dead sea turtles. Why does algae kill turtles and not people? When harmful algae die and decay, it depletes oxygen and marine life under water that depend on that oxygen die.

We know as red tide and algae front im, tourists are rolling out, vanishing never returning at hotels, staying away from restaurants and other businesses. This is a $4.5 billion industry in trouble.

Several key water projects are years from going online throughout Florida, but they are needed to treat and store water, slow Lake O discharges and redirect harmful water away from the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie.

We have to deal with the crisis in front us now and determine the health risks with fact-based documentation. The health department can’t be quiet on this issue. It can’t deny evidence doesn’t exist or more research isn’t needed. Residents and tourists need answers from the agency that is entrusted with our health.

*Tom Hayden, senior engagement editor at The News-Press, wrote this editorial on behalf of the editorial board.*