

IOWA WATER WATCH

Advocacy Toolkit Talking Points

Iowa's rivers, lakes, and beaches are a source of fun for everyone and deliver millions of tourism dollars to communities around the state. Our recreational lakes and beaches are threatened by increasing bacterial contamination and fertilizer pollution, which contributes to harmful algal blooms (HABs) that can create dangerous toxins. Bacteria and algae can lead to swim advisories, and sometimes drinking water advisories, that make it impossible to enjoy our beaches and threaten tourism dollars for many communities.

These talking points are designed to help advocates for Iowa's recreational waterways speak or write to elected officials and other decision-makers about the importance of enhancing recreation opportunities and protecting Iowa's lakes and beaches from pollution.



FUNDING & ECONOMICS

- Visits to 139 Iowa lakes result in over \$1 billion in direct spending in the state each year. Average total spending per lake is \$7.4 million dollars.
- While some lakes generate significant local spending (several Iowa lakes generate spending of over \$50 million annually), even small lakes in rural Iowa can generate spending of over \$2 million annually.
- Water quality is the most important factor for Iowans when choosing a lake for recreation. Water clarity is also an important consideration.
- Recreational amenities and opportunities improve quality of life and are important to attracting businesses and entrepreneurs.

RECREATION & TOURISM

- Only 1% of Iowa land is state-owned and open for public use.
 - 15% of state lands are actually water, including more than 60 lakes totaling over 40,000 acres. Lakes are an important component of what is available for public access and recreation in Iowa's parks.
 - Iowa ranks 47th in the nation for land available for public use.
 - Iowans demonstrated their support for protecting Iowa waterways by adopting the Water and Land Legacy Amendment in 2010 with 63% of the vote. The amendment created the Natural Resources and Outdoor Recreation Trust Fund, a permanent source of funding for clean water and outdoor recreation.
 - The Trust Fund requires a 3/8ths cent increase in the state sales tax to receive funding. Upon funding, it would provide approximately \$200 million annually for water quality, recreation, and natural resources conservation.
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IOWA BEACHES

- Since 2006, the Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR) has conducted weekly monitoring during the summer at 39 state park beaches for *E. coli* and microcystin, a toxin created by HABs.
- The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) Rock Island District conducts weekly monitoring at six beaches on Coralville, Saylorville, and Red Rock lakes. USACE monitors its beaches according to the same protocols as Iowa DNR.
- Some cities and counties arrange with DNR to test local park beaches for *E. coli*. The local managing department determines whether to issue an advisory based on the results provided by DNR.
- From 2014 through 2023, Backbone Beach had the most *E. coli* advisories of all monitored beaches at 127.
- From 2006 through 2023, Green Valley Lake Beach recorded 55 microcystin advisories, the most of all state park monitored beaches.
- The state spent \$12 million to restore Lake Darling from 2010-2014. Since it reopened in 2014, the lake has had 61 advisories for *E. coli* and 26 advisories for microcystin (as of 2023).
- In 2023, 22 state park beaches recorded swim advisories.
- In 2023, Brushy Creek Beach was under advisory for microcystin for 10 weeks in a row. It was the worst harmful algae bloom recorded since DNR began monitoring for microcystin in 2006. Prior to 2023, Brushy Creek only had two microcystin advisories in the last 17 years - one in 2013 and one in 2016.

HEALTH

- *E. coli* are bacteria found in the environment, food, and intestines of people and animals. Some strains of *E. coli* can cause adverse human health effects, but high levels of the bacteria can indicate the presence of other harmful pathogens or disease-causing microorganisms in the water due to fecal contamination.
- Children and elderly adults are the most vulnerable to waterborne illnesses, as well as individuals with weakened immune systems. Contaminated water can lead to diarrhea, infections, bloody stool, and in rare cases, permanent damage to the kidneys.
- Harmful algal blooms (HABs) are overgrowths of blue-green algae (also known as cyanobacteria) in water. They most often form in slow-moving, warm water when fed by an over-abundance of nutrients (nitrogen and phosphorus).
- HABs can produce dangerous toxins, known as cyanotoxins, that present significant threats to our health, environment, and economy.
- Exposure to cyanotoxins such as microcystin can occur through skin contact, ingestion, or inhalation. They can cause serious health problems, including rashes, diarrhea, vomiting, respiratory problems, liver or kidney damage, and even neurological effects.
- Pets and other animals that drink water contaminated with cyanotoxins can quickly ingest deadly levels.
- Dogs and other animals that swim in water with a recent HAB are at risk even after leaving the water, when they may lick themselves clean.

References and more information available at:

Iowa Lakes Project: <https://lakes.card.iastate.edu/>

Iowa Department of Natural Resources Beach Monitoring Program:

<https://programs.iowadnr.gov/aquia/Programs/Beaches>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: <https://www.cdc.gov/habs/>

Iowa Water Watch is a project of the Iowa Environmental Council. Learn more at iaenvironment.org/iww

