



The discovery of high toxin levels in water from Lake Erie had residents in Toledo, Ohio, relying on bottled water while local supplies were being tested. *Credit: Joshua Lott/Reuters*

TAP WATER BAN FOR TOLEDO RESIDENTS

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AUG. 3, 2014

Residents of Toledo, Ohio's fourth-largest city, spent the weekend under a water advisory after tests revealed toxins in the city's water supply, likely caused by algae growing in Lake Erie.

Tens of thousands of people kept faucets turned off and left their homes in search of clean water. They waited in lines at fire stations for bottled water, crossed state lines in search of stores with supplies after local outlets ran dry, and drove to friends' homes miles away to fill containers.

Early on Saturday, municipal officials asked the 500,000 residents served by the city's water system to stop using tap water after the toxins were found at a city water treatment plant. The orders were clear: Do not drink the water, do not brush your teeth or prepare food with it, and do not give it to your pets. Health officials also advised that children and people with weak immune systems refrain from using the water to bathe.

With no indication of when the ban might be lifted, residents were preparing for days without clean running water. The Ohio National Guard brought 33,000 gallons of drinking water to the region, while volunteers handed out bottled water at distribution centers set up at local high schools.

The New York Times

At a news conference on Sunday afternoon, the city's mayor, D. Michael Collins, and Gov. John R. Kasich said they did not know when the tap water ban would be lifted. They were waiting for an analysis of water samples by the federal Environmental Protection Agency before deciding whether the water was safe to use.

"I want to make sure that I would be comfortable with my family — my daughters and my wife — drinking the water," Governor Kasich said. "When I'm comfortable with that, then I think we're in a position where we can say to the people here in Toledo that we feel good about it, and we can move forward."

Earlier in the day, Mayor Collins said that the water quality appeared to be improving. "All I can tell you is everything is trending in a very positive direction," he said.

In the midst of it all, some residents searched for a sliver of humor.

Toledo has long been called "Glass City" because it was home to major glass manufacturers, including the Libbey Glass Company. But over the weekend, some residents adopted the slogan "Empty Glass City."

And as local television stations showed images of green-tinted water along Lake Erie, residents searched for rich descriptions: the color of pea soup, or the tone of the Incredible Hulk.

"It's murky and green — nothing I would swim in," said Katie Peters, 35. "It's sort of like the wicked witch from 'The Wizard of Oz': lime green."

Ms. Peters, a teacher, drove for an hour to a Walmart store in Michigan to stock up on bottled water because she wanted to make sure that the local supply was available for residents who could not afford to travel. She said she was impressed by how residents were helping each other.

"Our community has really come together," she said. "We have people who don't know each other offering to deliver water."

The city issued an urgent water notice on Saturday morning after testing at a city water treatment plant found unsafe levels of microcystin, a toxin that can cause diarrhea, vomiting or abnormal liver function. They urged residents to seek medical attention if they thought they had been exposed.



Residents waited in line to receive drinking water in Toledo on Sunday. There was no indication of when the tap-water ban might be lifted. Credit: Joshua Lott/Reuters

City officials said that a harmful algae bloom in Lake Erie likely contaminated the water. The blooms are often caused by runoff from overfertilized fields, malfunctioning septic systems or livestock pens, the notice said.

The citywide tap water ban was the first for Toledo, which is on the western edge of Lake Erie near the Michigan border. Environmental groups have been concerned about algae blooms in recent years because Lake Erie supplies water for 11 million people who live near the lake.

Last year, Carroll Township, which is east of Toledo on Lake Erie and has about 2,000 residents, issued a similar water ban after toxins from algae blooms were found in the water supply.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration predicted last month that western Lake Erie would have another large bloom of toxic algae this summer. But it was expected to be smaller than large blooms in 2013 and 2011. The agency warned that it could hurt tourism and fisheries in the region.

The lake suffered algae blooms between the 1960s and 1980s, but they mostly disappeared in the 1990s and early 2000s, the agency said. But over the past decade, the algae blooms have steadily increased.

On Saturday, Randy Nissen drove to a friend's house outside the water-ban zone to fill every container he could find — a Tupperware cake carrier, a coffee pot, growlers he uses for craft beer. The veterinarian clinic where his wife works was using water from a nearby well, he said.



Toledo, which is on the far west corner of Lake Erie, is Ohio's fourth-largest city, with some 500,000 residents. *National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration*

Mr. Nissen, 56, a teacher at a high school in Toledo, said he did not mind the inconveniences brought on by the ban, but he is concerned about how the toxin got into the water supply and what the authorities will do to prevent it from happening again.

"I'm worried that when the water comes back on, everything will go back to the status quo, and no one will address the problems that caused this," Mr. Nissen said.

The water ban brought many parts of the city to a standstill. Local restaurants were asked to remain closed unless they could cook and wash dishes with bottled water. The Toledo Zoo said it was relying on its own water reserves and reported that all of its animals were fine and being closely monitored.

Davonna Patch, 48, said she had received a supply of bottled water from her father in Michigan. City officials said it was fine for healthy adults to take showers, but Ms. Patch said she could not take one because she had an immune disorder.

"Two days in is not the time to get grouchy," she said. "Give me two more days without a shower, and then I'll be grouchy."