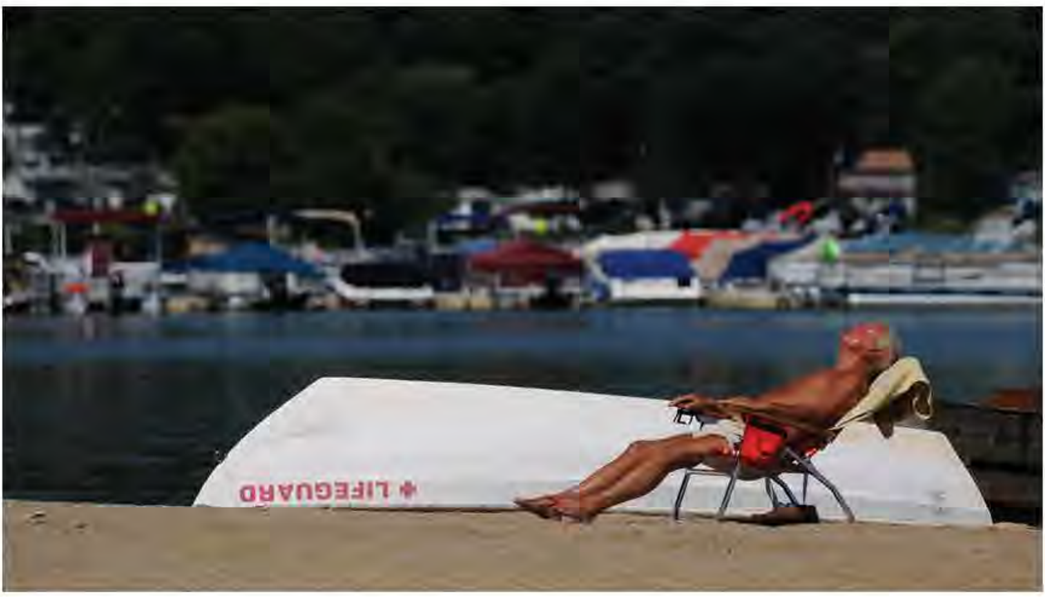
No Swimming At Lake Pocotopaug In East Hampton Because Of High Algae Levels



Vinne Garofalo, of East Hampton, sunbathes at Sears Park on Lake Pocotopaug in September 2014.

(Brad Horrigan / bhorrigan@courant.com)

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Special to The Courant

SHARELINES

High levels of blue-green algae has closed two swimming area on Lake Pocotopaug in East Hampton

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EAST HAMPTON — Public beaches at Lake Pocotopaug are closed to swimming because of a late-summer bloom of blue-green algae, which can be harmful to people and pets.

Town Manager Mike Maniscalco said Tuesday that the town beach at Sears Park and a second swimming area along Route 66 have been closed since Thursday because of excessive amounts of blue-green cyanobacteria, which can produce dangerous toxins.

Maniscalco said the latest tests indicated a "Category 3" bloom, the most serious, requiring immediate closure of beaches to swimming. He said the tests are conducted every couple of days.

"We are obligated by the [state Department of Public Health] to close the beaches when there is a Category 3 bloom," Maniscalco said, adding that recent tests indicated elevated levels of blue-green algae.

The federal Environmental Protection Agency states on its website that reactions to cyanobacteria toxins in blue-green algae can range "from mild skin rash to serious illness and even death. Acute illnesses caused by exposure to cyanotoxins have been reported," the EPA said.

Maniscalco stressed that not all blue-green algae is harmful to humans. "It's a complicated process," Maniscalco said. "Some people can swim in the water and say 'I'm fine' and it's true. The tests just indicate a presence of blue-green algae, but not all blue-green algae produces toxins. We have to play it safe."

The 512-acre Lake Pocotopaug has been plagued by recurrent algae blooms over the years, which environmentalists say are a result of extensive development around the shore, allowing excessive nutrients, such as phosphorus and nitrogen, to wash into the lake. The nutrients, acting essentially as fertilizer, fuel plant growth, triggering blooms.

In 1999, Lake Pocotopaug was the scene of a major fish kill that was linked to a toxic form of algae known as haptophytes. A 2013 report recommended improving storm-water management in the lake watershed to curb runoff washing into the lake.

Maniscalco couldn't say if Tuesday's heavy rains would improve the situation. He said there are no easy solutions for Pocotopaug's woes.

"The development around the lake that's causing some of the problems happened over many years, and it's going to take years to fix the problem," the town manager said. "It's a big project, and it's going to take a lot of effort to make the lake healthy again."