



Cottagers damaging Outaouais lakes at alarming rate, Quebec warns

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Dozens of Outaouais lakes are deteriorating rapidly because of cottage development, Outaouais' director for the Quebec Ministry of Environment said yesterday.

Marc Dubreuil said septic tank runoff, the use of detergent and lawn fertilizer are adding nutrients to the lakes more quickly than expected. The process known as eutrophication, causes heavy algae growth, murky water and changes in fish population.

The process is similar to the problem Lake Erie faced during the 1960s when nutrients from sewage and agricultural and urban runoff spurred unchecked growth of algae. When the algae die and decay, they remove oxygen from the water.

Some of the lakes affected include Gauvreau, Blue-Sea, Saint-Pierre, Cayamant, Sicraire, Lemery, Whissel and des Cedres.

Emmanuel Dalpe, a biologist consultant working for the municipality of La Peche, said water quality in Lac Gauvreau west of Wakefield is at risk because of the pressure of human development and cattle raised near a creek that flows into the lake.

Mr. Dalpe said the lake is particularly sensitive because of the sluggish flow of water. He said it takes 18 years for water to flow through the lake into the La Peche River.

The University of Ottawa is doing a study of the lake to determine whether the blue-green algae bloom that occurs in the fall includes toxic strains of algae.

"Some of these blue-green algae could be toxic, and we want to investigate what could happen if it comes into contact with humans," Mr. Dalpe said. "Nobody has reported becoming ill, but that could happen if you ingest it."

Mr. Dubreuil said the ministry doesn't have the resources to monitor all the lakes, but provides technical assistance to municipalities and property owners' associations that want to limit development or ensure septic tanks are correctly installed and pumped out regularly.

The ministry says there is a link between the density of cottage development and lake degradation.

"Human activity puts pressure on the lakes and speeds up their aging because of nutrients that come from septic tanks," Mr. Dubreuil said. "Nutrients flowing into the lakes also come from fertilizer put on lawns, and from erosion due to tree cutting nearby.

"A lot of lakes are at risk of aging rapidly. Waste water with detergent goes into the septic tanks and ultimately into the lakes. It is another source of nutrients in the lakes."

Each lake has a capacity for absorbing nutrients, Mr. Dubreuil said. Below that level, the lake can respond to the inflow of nutrients without becoming murky with algae. But lakes begin to grow algae and aquatic



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Sewage and runoff are spurring algae growth that's responsible for fouling West Quebec lakes.

plants when there are more nutrients than they can absorb.

Mr. Dubreuil said people who live around the lakes are the cause of the problem and the ministry believes they should provide solutions.

"We are trying to give people the motivation to reverse the changes that are occurring," Mr. Dubreuil said. "People should minimize the input of nutrients into these lakes.

"The first thing to do is to make sure that provincial regulations for septic tanks are respected. Cottagers have to empty their septic tanks every two years. Municipalities have the power to enforce this and provide a service of emptying tanks at low cost."

Mr. Dubreuil said municipalities can use zoning regulations to increase lot sizes to reduce the density of development around lakes. He said development can be restricted on certain parts of some lakes.

The Ministry of Environment has been giving technical support and courses to municipal inspectors to make sure septic tank regulations are enforced. Mr. Dubreuil said municipalities can enforce protection zones around lakes to ban some types of development if necessary.

Mr. Dubreuil said an increasing number of cottagers complained about the decline in lake water quality in recent years.

"This is something that should concern people," he said. "It used to be that you could go to the lake and have your children swim in front of the cottage. Now some lakes are full of vegetation and your children may not want to go there."

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