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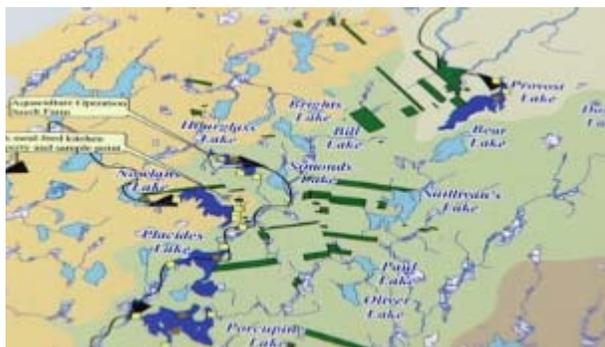
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N.S. study finds declining watershed quality

Last Updated: Wednesday, October 6, 2010 | 6:55 PM AT [Comments3Recommend0](#)[CBC News](#)

Ten lakes in the Carleton River watershed were studied. (CBC)

Water quality in several lakes in southwestern Nova Scotia has been declining for decades, according to a study released Wednesday by the provincial Environment Department.

Department staff began sampling the water quality of 10 lakes in the Carleton River watershed in 2008. That watershed, which includes nearly 100 lakes and rivers, is in Yarmouth and Digby counties.

Residents in the area have complained about blue-green algae for years.

While algae occurs naturally, it becomes a problem with excessive nutrients in the water, which can be caused

by poor waste-management practices, fertilizers and faulty septic systems, the study said.

The algae blooms, which form a fluorescent green and toxic mat over the water, are caused by higher than normal levels of phosphorous and nitrogen.

The source could be area mink farms, an aquaculture operation, a fishmeal plant, and residential development, said Judy MacDonald of the Environment Department's water and wastewater branch.

"There was a number of sources for nutrient loading that was identified," MacDonald told CBC News.

The 64-page report found water quality has been deteriorating since the 1980s.

Of the lakes that were studied, Hourglass Lake, Nowlans Lake and Placides Lake — all upstream — were affected most. Six others — Fanning, Ogden, Parr, Porcupine, Provost and Vaughan lakes — were "very" or "moderately" affected by the blue-green algae.

Only Sloans Lake had near pristine conditions.

Mink farms inspected

Because mink farms were recognized as nutrient sources, the provincial government inspected eight properties this year and found deficiencies on five, which it says have been addressed.

"We found some farms ... were storing manure too close to the watercourse and we compared this to the guidelines on manure storage and handling that Nova Scotia Agriculture has," said Adrian Fuller, a regional director of environmental monitoring and compliance. "A directive will be issued, for example, to move that manure storage."

Environment Canada also conducted 10 inspections of mink farms and collected samples in May, which were shown not to be harmful to fish.

No enforcement action was taken under the federal Fisheries Act.

Agriculture Minister John MacDonell said while the survey shows a problem, he's not prepared to impose a moratorium on new mink farms.

"It's not people who are not in the industry yet that are the problem," he said. "It's people who have been in the industry for some time so we don't really see a moratorium addressing that."

Environment Minister Sterling Belliveau was careful not to single out any industry as the source of the algae problem.

"That has not been determined. We have identified the possibilities of what these sources can originate from and we have to work from this point."

The Environment Department says it will continue to test water quality in the watershed area and visit more mink farms and other sites that may be contributing excess nutrients to lakes and rivers.

The department is also drafting new regulations for the mink industry, which are expected to come into effect in the spring.

With files from The Canadian Press

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