



UNCLASSIFIED

To: Meegan Fitzharris MLA, Minister for Health and Wellbeing *mf 6/3/19*

Through: Michael De'Ath, Director-General ACT Health

Subject: Meeting with Tuggeranong Community Council on Tuesday 7 May 2019 regarding blue-green algae in Lake Tuggeranong

- Throughout the year the Environment Protection Authority (EPA) monitors the recreational water quality at various sites in Lake Tuggeranong, Lake Ginninderra, and the Molonglo River.
- Blue-green algae (BGA) grow naturally in Australian fresh and saline waters. Some types of BGA can produce toxins that may be harmful to humans and animals.
- BGA are usually found in low numbers. However, when environmental conditions are favourable their numbers increase rapidly creating a 'bloom'.
- Drought conditions, high summer temperatures and high nutrient levels are all important factors in creating the conditions to cause algal blooms.
- This summer, these conditions have led to significant algal blooms in Lake Tuggeranong, which has been closed for primary-contact recreation (i.e. whole-body water contact or submersion of the head), from December 2018 until 2 May 2019.
- The most common exposure pathway to these toxins is through direct contact with affected waterways (e.g. swimming), including breathing in fine water spray or droplets created when the surface of affected water is broken during water-based recreational activities.
- Possible health affects include skin and eye allergic reactions, gastrointestinal symptoms from consumption of affected water or fish, and asthma or hay fever-like symptoms caused by breathing in fine water spray or droplets from affected water during recreational water activities.
- Some types of BGA release chemicals that can produce a strong odour during algal blooms. There is no evidence to suggest that the odour can cause toxic effects.
- In recent months, there has been mounting community concern about the algal bloom in Lake Tuggeranong, the potential health impacts and what the ACT government is doing to reduce BGA in the lakes during summer months.
- This week, the Acting Chief Health Officer and a representative of the Education Directorate met school officials and a staff union representative at Lake Tuggeranong College. Information about the potential health impacts was well received.

- Next Tuesday 7 May, EPSDD will report to the Tuggeranong Community Council, as part of their regular stakeholder consultation on government investments in water quality infrastructure to reduce the flow of pollutants from the catchments entering ACT lakes.
- EPSDD have requested a representative from ACT Health to attend the meeting in anticipation of questions on health impacts from the community. ACT Health has agreed to attend.
- Following the ACT government presentation at the council meeting, there will be a Forum for the candidates for the new Federal electorate of Bean. Given recent media exposure of BGA at Lake Tuggeranong, community concerns and the potential for federal election candidates to be present, there is a chance of media interest during or arising from this meeting.
- The communications team from EPSDD and ACT Health are working together to develop talking points and ensure a clear risk communication strategy.
- Lake Tuggeranong is now open and algae levels are low.

Media Points

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- BGA are usually found in low numbers. However, when environmental conditions are favourable their numbers increase rapidly creating a 'bloom'.
- The most common exposure pathway to these toxins is through direct contact with affected waterways.
- Possible health effects include skin and eye allergic reaction, gastrointestinal symptoms from consumption of affected water or fish, and asthma or hay fever-like symptoms caused by breathing in fine water spray or droplets from affected water during recreational water activities.
- Some types of BGA release chemicals that can produce a strong odour during algal blooms. There is no evidence to suggest that the odour can cause toxic effects.
- There is limited research available on the possible health effects of exposure to airborne BGA toxins. Based on the current evidence available, if you have no direct contact with affected water but you live or work near an affected waterway, it is very unlikely that you would be exposed to harmful levels of BGA toxins in the air.
- Members of the public are reminded to check signage at recreational areas prior to entering the water.

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