The Salt Lake Tribune
(http://www.sltrib.com)

# Op-ed: Algae events should help Utah's water awareness bloom

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Published: September 17, 2016 03:00PM
Updated: September 18, 2016 01:31PM

Recent headlines in newspapers across the Wasatch Front have featured expanded coverage of local harmful algal blooms (HABs) affecting the lives and livelihoods of Utah's residents. As communities brace for further challenges in light of climate change, population growth and aging infrastructure, people are beginning to ask questions about the complex nature of Utah's water system.

Our water and wastewater infrastructure lies underground, out of sight and out of mind. But this critical infrastructure works 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days per year, to bring clean, safe water to us. It also takes away what flows down our drains and toilets so that the water can be treated before it is released back into the environment.

Communities around Utah Lake, the Jordan River and its canals saw all too well this summer what happens when our water systems fail to keep up with our needs. Farmers and local residents experienced several days without water for outdoor irrigation because of the HAB that plagued Utah Lake. More recently, farmers and ranchers along Scofield Reservoir and Price River are experiencing a similar challenge. These communities, like so many around our nation — Toledo, Ohio; southeastern Florida; and Lake Elsinore, Calif., to name a few — know that a day without water, whether it is for drinking, outdoor use or recreation, can be a crisis.

That is why we at iUTAH, a multi-university research and training program aimed at strengthening science for Utah's water future, took part in a nationwide educational effort called "Imagine a Day Without Water" on Sept. 15. Hundreds of organizations across the country, including water agencies, city governments, engineering firms, schools and other community organizations joined forces to raise public awareness and spark action to solve water and wastewater infrastructure problems today, before they become a crisis tomorrow.

While much of the Wasatch Front's water starts as "free" snow before flowing to our rivers and reservoirs, it is far from inexpensive. Salt Lake City's budget to bring safe drinking water to our homes, schools, churches, and businesses last year was just over $74 million; add to that another $34 million to transport and reclaim our wastewater.

Two years ago, the Utah Division of Water Quality, together with wastewater reclamation facility operators and other stakeholders, worked to implement a new technology-based limit for phosphorus. This limit can help reduce nutrients discharged into streams and reservoirs, which can, in turn, help improve water quality in our freshwater ecosystems and diminish one of the major factors contributing to HAB development.

While this measure will not come into effect until 2020 (or as late as 2025 for some communities), some wastewater facilities are already planning and implementing system upgrades. If we are proactive in making such adjustments now, we can get ahead of the curve, and potentially decrease the occurrence and severity of HABs in our backyard waters. By continually maintaining our infrastructure and deploying new technologies, we will save money in the long run, prevent disruptions to daily life, protect the health of our citizens and economy, and make our waters clean again.

Community leaders, elected officials and local businesses must make clean water a priority. Without strong voices advocating for this work, our water infrastructure will continue to be out of sight and out of mind. We have to keep up the pressure to address our aging water and wastewater infrastructure systems today so the Wasatch Front can "imagine a day without water" instead of the reality of having to live through it.

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