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Public health advisory issued for portions of Elk Creek and Umpqua River

A health advisory prompted by high algae toxin levels found in Elk Creek from the mouth at the Umpqua River to Elk Creek Tunnel on HWY 38, and the Umpqua River from Sawyers Rapids to the mouth of Elk Creek, located in and around Elkton, was issued today by the Oregon Department of Human Services (DHS) and the Douglas County Health Department.

Water monitoring was conducted following the deaths of pet dogs in the area. Water monitoring has confirmed the presence of toxins harmful to humans and animals produced by blue-green algae, said Laura Boswell, Harmful Algae Bloom Surveillance program coordinator in DHS. The highest levels of toxins were found in stagnant pools adjacent to Elk Creek and the Umpqua River, and residual levels were found in Elk Creek at the mouth. Tissue samples from some of the dogs are being tested to confirm whether exposure to algae toxins were the cause of death.

Swallowing or inhaling water droplets should be avoided, as well as skin contact with water by humans or animals. Drinking raw water from these portions of Elk Creek and the Umpqua River, especially from stagnant pools, is especially dangerous. Boswell advised campers and other visitors that toxins cannot be removed by boiling, filtering or treating the water.

People who draw in-home water directly from an algae bloom-affected water body are advised to use an alternative water source. If their drinking water supplier draws from an affected water source, they may want to ask if the water has been tested. If the supplier has not tested the water, DHS recommends using another water source not affected by the bloom.

DHS recommends that people who choose to eat fish from waters where algae blooms are present should remove all fat, skin and organs before cooking since toxins are more likely to collect in these tissues.

Exposure to toxins can produce symptoms of numbness, tingling and dizziness that can lead to difficulty breathing or heart problems and require immediate medical attention. Symptoms of skin irritation, weakness, diarrhea, nausea, cramps and fainting should also receive medical attention if they persist or worsen. Children and pets are particularly susceptible.

The public will be advised when the concern no longer exists.

With proper precautions to avoid water contact, people are encouraged to visit Elk Creek and the Umpqua River and enjoy activities such as camping, hiking, biking, picnicking, catch-and-release fishing and bird watching. Boating is safe as long as speeds do not create excessive water spray, which could lead to inhalation risk.

For health information, contact Laura Boswell, Harmful Algae Bloom Surveillance program coordinator, 971-673-0438 or www.oregon.gov/DHS/ph/hab/; also the DHS toll-free information line at 1-877-290-6767, or Jerry Meyer of the Douglas County Health Department at 541-440-3578 or www.co.douglas.or.us/health/EH/default.asp.