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A blooming problem

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Alaskan company helps city control Lake Attitash algae population

Closed since August due to algae buildup, Lake Attitash got some help earlier this week from a company with more than a little experience in large-scale environmental disasters.

On Wednesday morning, workers from Gunderboom Inc. of Anchorage, Alaska installed a boom, or floating fabric filter, across the width of the Back River in Merrimac, roughly a half-mile from where it feeds into Lake Attitash. The boom, which is 200-feet-long and 5-feet-high, is intended to decrease the amount of nutrients coming into the lake. It is being paid for through a demonstration grant from the Department of Environmental Management, and is costing around \$30,000.

The day before Lake Attitash Association President Tod Campbell, Mayor David Hildt, Mayoral Aide Orlando Pacheco and two Gunderboom representatives laid out the boom on the shores of Sandy Beach in Merrimac.

"We're not trying to filter all the water," said John Rocki Kurucz of Gunderboom. "We're just trying to increase residence time."

Kurucz explained that if flow can simply be slowed down, the nutrients will have a chance to settle to the bottom of the river and not continue on into Lake Attitash.

"It's an experimental technology, there's no guarantees," said Kurucz. "This is not the silver bullet that's going to make the river like it was 100 years ago."

Lake Attitash has been suffering from high amounts of blue-green algae in the water. The algae feed off of nutrients in the water such as phosphorous and nitrogen, which have been building up in the lake for a number of years.

Campbell said the primary culprit is most likely the Merrimac river.

"The Back River is the main flow into the lake, and it's a significant source of the nutrients coming in," said Campbell. "Not the only source."

Campbell said the high levels of nutrients in the Back River may come in part from the Sargent Farm, a commercial composting business that has existed very near the river since the mid-80s. He said there were also various hobby farms in Newton, N.H. whose groundwater feeds into the watershed that makes its way down to the lake. Though the boom is only targeting the Back River, Campbell said the Merrimac and Newton, N.H., watersheds do contribute to the lake's problem.

"Amesbury probably occupies three-quarters of the shoreline, but Merrimac and Newton occupy three-quarters of the watershed," said Campbell.

Campbell said his association completed a watershed study in 1998 through a small state grant. As part of the study, two engineers contacted Vincent Vignali, who used to work for the Massachusetts Metropolitan District Commission. Vignali informed them of the boom being deployed in the Wachusett Reservoir, and recommended the same for Lake Attitash.

Campbell and others are hopeful for the new technology, which has been used to create a safe swimming area in the Charles River after three years of beach closings due to extraordinarily high bacteria levels. The boom is expected to remain in the lake anywhere from five to 10 years.

"We have to keep track of what flows in behind it," said Campbell. "Hopefully in that period we can focus on the watershed. It's in some sense a Band-Aid for what the real problem is, but in the short term that's okay."

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