

Senate moves legislation to address harmful algal blooms

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In recent years, massive harmful algal blooms (HABs) have devastated critical habitats along the Florida coasts and Great Lakes. These phenomena can cause significant “dead zones” and disastrous consequences for ecosystems and economies, resulting in economic losses from multi-billion-dollar fishing, shipping, and tourism industries. On September 27, the Senate responded to these disasters by unanimously passing the Harmful Algal Bloom and Hypoxia Research and Control Amendments Act of 2017 (S.1057), introduced on May 4 by Senators Bill Nelson (D-FL), Gary Peters (D-MI), and Rob Portman (R-OH).

The Harmful Algal Bloom and Hypoxia Research and Control Act (HABHRCA), which was initially authorized in 1998, requires the development of a federal response to address the frequent occurrences of HABs and environments with severe oxygen depletion and established the Inter-Agency Task Force on HABs and Hypoxia through the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy.

The Senate bill reauthorizes the HABHRCA for fiscal years 2019 through 2023, including a total of \$110 million funding for further research into the causes and control of large algae blooms and hypoxia. The legislation also adds a representative from the Army Corps of Engineers to the Inter-Agency Task Force on HABs, and grants the federal government the authority to declare severe algal blooms or hypoxic events as events of national significance, which would trigger access to disaster-like funds. In a statement released by his office, Senator Bill Nelson emphasized that this legislation will help make federal assistance available to those most impacted by these algae outbreaks.

The bill now heads to the House of Representatives for consideration, where another HABs bill, the Harmful Algal Blooms Solutions Act of 2017 (H.R.3661), was recently introduced by Representative Brian Mast (R-FL-18) to establish a program to award prizes for the development of innovative, environmentally safe solutions for reducing, mitigating, and controlling harmful algal blooms.

Sources: E&E News, Library of Congress, National Geographic, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
