

Senate subcommittee holds hearing on algal bloom monitoring and impacts

August 28, 2018

On August 28, the Senate Commerce Subcommittee on Oceans, Atmosphere, Fisheries, and Coast Guard held a hearing on U.S. Harmful Algal Bloom (HAB) events and the status of the algal-bloom research, technology, and monitoring techniques. HABs are overgrown colonies of harmful algae that can debilitate and kill other organisms, ranging from fish to humans. While HABs can occur naturally, they are also linked to higher water temperature or excessive influx of nutrients that are often sourced from runoff from farmlands and lawns.

During opening remarks, senators highlighted the health, economic, and cultural impact impacts from HABs in Wisconsin, Alaska, and Florida. However, according to Chair Dan Sullivan (R-AK), almost every state in the country experiences some type of HAB, which are occurring at an increasing rate.

Last September, the Senate unanimously passed the Harmful Algal Bloom and Hypoxia Research and Control Amendments Act of 2017 (S. 1057). The bipartisan bill would direct the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) to provide grants oriented towards HAB intervention and mitigation methods and technical assistance on HAB's to other non-federal governments. The bill would also reauthorize the national algal bloom and hypoxia program, which expires on September 30. Senators Sullivan and Bill Nelson (D-FL) urged the House to pass similar legislation introduced this July (H.R. 6645), which mandates a federal action plan to address HABs in the Everglades in addition to the actions already outlined in the Senate bill.

During questioning, Senator Ed Markey (D-MA) asked Dr. Don Anderson, Senior Scientist of the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, about the occurrence and severity of HABs. "The case in fresh water is crystal clear, warmth is contributing to the problem," Dr. Anderson responded. "In the marine realm we are seeing (the impact) more as a movement of species. If it gets too warm, some species may not be able to thrive... and will move north." Anderson also expressed concern for algal blooms that are moving into Alaska, calling it the biggest threat to Alaskan ecosystems and indigenous communities from invasive species. Dr. Anderson also advocated for increased levels of funding for HAB research, saying that current levels fluctuate and "remain well below what is needed for dealing with HAB," and that reauthorization of the algal bloom program would help maintain funding allocations from federal agencies. Brian Stubbs of the Cleveland Water Alliance called for more research on technological mitigation and innovation, particularly at upstream contributors like farms. "We all eat... but we need to do it smarter," Stubbs stated. Going forward, Stubbs said that creating more affordable, real-time HAB detectors would be crucial to mitigating the impacts of HABs.

Sources: E&E News; Library of Congress; National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration; U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation.
