Pollution visible in video of Pine River

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by Rosemary Horvath
For the Herald

Gary Rayburn, chairman of the Healthy Pine River citizens group, video-taped the muck floating atop the Pine River in March and April.

"It's beautiful today everywhere but the waters of the Pine River," he remarked.

His video record of the "visible pollution on the Pine" indicates there is a problem.

Alma College and the city of Alma began taking periodic water samples to test to determine the cause.

Rayburn's videos were forwarded to Molly Rippke, senior aquatic biologist, Michigan Department of Environmental Quality.

Until they have samples to know for sure, staff who viewed the videos agreed the floating scum "looks like dead and live algae, and decomposing organic matter," Rippke said.

"This is sometimes referred to as 'muck'. Algae and aquatic plants are natural components of rivers, lake and impoundments; but can be exacerbated by excess nutrients from agricultural and residential fertilizers and nutrients entering the waterways.

"Muck and algae would tend to accumulate at the edges and more stagnant portions of lakes and rivers (like the cove in these videos), particularly as the weather warms up. Most algal blooms are harmless, but occasionally toxins can be produced by blue-green algae. The presence of blue-green algae does not necessarily mean that the toxins will be present."

She advised anyone who wishes to enter a complaint about nuisance or harmful algae (or potential pollution spills) may use the 24-hour Pollution Emergency Alerting System (PEAS), by calling 800-292-4706. Access the algae reference guide to help clarify what constitutes a potential harmful algal bloom. Images or videos of a potential harmful algal bloom may be submitted online at Algaebloom@michigan.gov.

Michigan has roughly 76,000 miles of rivers in the Water Resources jurisdiction. DEQ uses a five-year rotating schedule in water quality monitoring, so each watershed becomes a priority for monitoring every five years.

The monitoring year for the Pine River is 2017, although occasionally there is monitoring outside the normal scheduled year, Rippke said.

"We do not have any E. coli monitoring planned in the Pine River for 2016. As always, we do respond to spills and environmental complaints. We did receive several monitoring requests for the Pine River, and we will consider those and make decisions in early 2017," she said.