

Part 7a - A Cyclic History: Pollute, Distort, Pacify, Repeat . . . The Never Ending Cover-up

By Doug Baird

August 4, 2017 — Algae blooms close Taughannock Falls State Park, the number of toxic algae blooms in New York is up 25 percent this week, and the presence of toxic blue-green algae in Dryden Lake is confirmed by the DEC.

This isn't the beginning of some apocalyptic eco-thriller – it's the reality that people in Tompkins County, and all over the country will have to get used to as the fallout from 30 years of unrestricted agricultural activity has turned toxic Cyanobacteria (blue-green algae) into this summer's biggest blockbuster.

While a decade of denial and do-nothing politicking slowly erodes under an irrefutable tide of scientific proofs — Big Agriculture is pushing back with the concepts of acceptable levels of pollution and voluntary guidelines, and insisting that abatement and remediation procedures are long-term goals for future decades.

An intransigently selfish agricultural industry is distorting the evidence to maximize their profits in the face of disastrous environmental consequences.

The real story behind agriculture's "Stewards of the Land" façade

- March 14, 2008 — Scientific American, "Fertilizer Runoff Overwhelms Streams and Rivers – Creating Vast 'Dead Zones'"

"We need to either maintain or, in many cases, restore the integrity of this stream network, including the smallest streams," aquatic ecologist Mulholland of Oak Ridge National Laboratory says, "That [also] means not utilizing all the land to grow crops."

He adds: "Certainly, the outlook is not great because there is a lot of pressure to go in the other direction."

- September, 2011 — USDA, "Assessment of the Effects of Conservation Practices on Cultivated Cropland in the Great Lakes Region" Summary of Findings

"Voluntary, Incentives-Based Conservation Approaches Are Achieving Results."

[These results, however, were only when compared to a no-practice scenario that simulates no conservation practices at all.]

- August 8, 2014 — Scientific American, "Deadly Algae Are Everywhere, Thanks to Agriculture"

“Farm fields in the Lake Erie Basin deliver nearly 640 grams of phosphorus per acre to that lake, or more than 60 percent of the phosphorus now reaching the water. As a result, the year 2011 saw the largest algal bloom in Lake Erie in recorded history.”

“The most important thing that can be done is to reduce agricultural runoff,” says Rajesh Bejankiwar, leader of a joint US and Canada task force. “Prevention is better than treatment.”

- August 16, 2014 — International Business Times, “Lake Erie Algae Bloom Crisis Is Putting Pressure On Ohio, Farm States To Tackle Agricultural Pollution Problems”

“On the shores of Lake Erie, the immediate sense of crisis has passed. Following the toxic algae that bloomed in the lake earlier this month, forcing residents of Toledo, Ohio to rely on bottled water for their drinking supply, authorities now offer assurances that the tap water is safe.”

“Around the nation, similar worries have become a part of everyday life as communities grapple with growing volumes of pollution spilling into waterways from livestock and farming operations.”

“The American Farm Bureau Federation is leading a lawsuit against the EPA’s Chesapeake program for an overreach of federal authority under the Clean Water Act. “These are uniquely local decisions that should be made by local governments,” Bob Stallman, the bureau’s president, said in a January statement.”

- July 31, 2017 — NBC, Channel 5 News, “Nutrient pollution: Voluntary steps are failing to shrink algae blooms and dead zones”

“The Gulf of Mexico forecast predicts an 8,185-square-mile dead zone — more than four times the goal set by an intergovernmental task force.”

“In spite of more than 30 years of research and monitoring, more than 15 years of assessments and goal-setting, and more than \$30 billion in federal conservation funding since 1995, average nitrogen levels in the Mississippi have not declined since the 1980s.”

“The task force leading this effort recently extended the deadline for its goal of a 1,930-square-mile dead zone from 2015 to 2035. Today the dead zone is more than triple that size. Our newly published modeling shows that it would take a 59 percent reduction in the amount of nitrogen entering the Gulf of Mexico to reach the task force’s goal.”

A victory over agriculture’s “Stewards of the Land” equals a cleaner Chesapeake Bay

In 2010, frustrated by worsening conditions in spite of decades of voluntary, incentive-based approaches, states around the Chesapeake Bay requested the EPA to establish a total maximum daily load under the Clean Water Act that limits the amount of nutrients and sediment that can enter the bay.

Agricultural groups, supported by 21 states outside the Chesapeake watershed, challenged the use of a total maximum daily load in court and lost.

By 2015, loads of nitrogen in the bay had dropped by 8 percent, while phosphorus and sediment in the bay dropped by 20 percent and 7 percent, respectively.

Today in Tompkins County

The only thing “best” about “Best Practices” is how it sounds

Cornell’s self-proclaimed “Best Practices” for manure management is a compilation of voluntary recommendations, with a level of risk management so low that even its authors admit “these guidelines will not prevent runoff.”

The alarming manure spill in Salmon Creek in February 2017 is just one of many incidents that have occurred in full compliance with Cornell’s “Best Practices”.

Cornell’s “Best Practices” didn’t stop the growth of the toxic blue-green algae that shut down Taughannock Falls State Park nor prevented its appearance in Dryden Lake.

As an environmental protection against agricultural runoff and its consequences, Cornell’s “Best Practices” are about as useful as a footstool in a flood.

Taughannock Falls today . . . Meyers Point tomorrow?

While Taughannock Creek supplies 7.9% of the Bio-available Phosphorus (algae food) in Cayuga Lake, Salmon Creek’s agriculturally dominated runoff supplies a staggering 15.6% — how long will it be before Lansing loses the use of its only lakefront park and its biggest tourist attraction due to toxic algae blooms? [Statistics from “Phosphorus Bioavailability and Loads” – Upstate Freshwater Institute, 2015]

Meanwhile, the much touted Cornell Lake Modeling Project [Feb 2017] still recommends the same old voluntary and ineffective “Best Management Practices” for agriculture, where high-risk-of-runoff practices should only be “avoided,” but never prohibited. Failing to ban TDMLs [Total Daily Maximum Loads] for agricultural runoff, powerful Ag interests are now seeking to manage their implementation.

If you can’t change the facts, suppress them — or remove them

“What happened to the evidence of Tompkins County’s agricultural pollution?” Although it’s the greatest source of pollution in the county and the driving force behind global warming, Tomkins County’s recent Comprehensive Plan gives no hint that agricultural pollution even exists — it’s an act of suppression that takes both power, and people, to accomplish.

In Tompkins County, the expert's role is not to offer alternatives, but merely to implement doctrine. There are many experts, but no independent experts — they all feed from the same trough.

Questions & Answers

Is the quality of our lakes and waterways getting worse?

YES

Are farms the major cause of this pollution and of algae blooms?

YES

Are any of the plans that have been implemented or proposed going to have any real effect in the foreseeable future?

NO

Is it too late to do anything about it?

MAYBE

Farmers may claim that they're only following regulations, but when they bully and buy the regulators, it's not much of an excuse to fall back on.

The only question remaining is — How long this will go on before the damage to the health, welfare, quality of life and economic survival of everyone else in the Finger Lakes outweighs the profit and growth of the agricultural sector in the eyes of politicians and bureaucrats?

If we don't want to wait for the answer . . . maybe we could bully and buy them back.

We may just be in time.

This posting will be continued in *Part 7b - A Cyclic History: Pollute, Distort, Pacify, Repeat . . . In an Ag Zone, No One Can Hear You Scream*