



Cayuga Lake Watershed Network  
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May 22, 2025

**Senator Pete Harkham**

NYS Senate Standing Committee on Environmental Conservation  
Office Address: 315 LOB, Room 315  
Albany, NY 12247

**Re: NYS Senate Standing Committee on Environmental Conservation public hearing to evaluate the efficacy of the state’s monitoring and management of HABs and to examine potential legislative solutions**

Thank you, Chair Harkham, Senator May, and members of the Committee, for the opportunity to share this written testimony on behalf of three Cayuga Lake watershed organizations: the Cayuga Lake Watershed Network (CLWN), the Cayuga Lake Watershed Intermunicipal Organization (CWIO), and Cayuga Lake Environmental Action Now (CLEAN). Together, we represent over 400 community members and businesses, 50 municipalities, and a network of grassroots advocates united by a shared commitment to protecting and restoring the health of Cayuga Lake and its surrounding watershed. Through coordinated data-driven advocacy, intermunicipal collaboration, and community engagement, our organizations work to safeguard drinking water and protect the resilience of our region’s economy and water resources.

The issue of harmful algal blooms (HABs) in the Finger Lakes and beyond is having, and will continue to have, a widespread impact in our communities. HABs increasingly threaten public water supplies, result in closed public bathing beaches, and harm tourism and other aspects of our economy including lowering property values. The DEC estimates that the Finger Lakes provide drinking water to over 2 million New Yorkers, yet, in September 2016 the city of Auburn detected cyanotoxins passing through their treatment systems—the first time this had happened in any NY public water system. They continue to find cyanotoxins in the water as recently as October 2024. This is an unacceptable risk to public health. Beyond drinking water, our Finger Lakes underpin a \$3.2 billion tourism industry and support 60,000 jobs. Unchecked HABs threaten these vital economic drivers.

We believe New York State can better support on-the-ground partners in protecting our lakes and promote smarter watershed management to combat the complex and growing threat of HABs in two significant ways:

First, we urge the Legislature to pass and fully fund Senate Bill 1833 and Assembly bill 5150—the Harmful Algal Bloom Monitoring and Prevention Act. This bipartisan bill establishes a science-based, common-sense framework for a coordinated statewide response to HABs. A core provision of the bill is the creation of a centralized, web-accessible clearinghouse for HAB-related data, contributing factor research, effective regulatory strategies, emerging mitigation technologies, and evidence-based best practices. This resource would enable local and state entities to better align efforts and adopt collaborative strategies more effectively.

Key to the success of a coordinated, statewide endeavor to deploy HABs monitoring, research, prevention, and mitigation best practices is the bill’s provision for a centralized grant program. This is a critical tool to ensure that municipalities, intermunicipal organizations, community-based nonprofits, and academic institutions, have access to the resources they need to expand the important work already being done and pursue more innovative projects. Additionally, to foster effective collaboration, utilization, and transparency, we recommend establishing an independent coordinating committee including representatives from these stakeholder groups to work in cooperation with the DEC in the delivery of this program.

Second, we call on New York State agencies to uphold Public Health Law Section 1100 and Title 10 of the New York Codes, Rules, and Regulations, which authorize water purveyors to develop and revise Watershed Rules and Regulations (WRRs) to protect public water supplies from both point and nonpoint source pollution.

Many of the WRRs currently in place were adopted before HABs emerged as a significant threat, and they must be updated to reflect today’s challenges. WRRs provide enhanced protection to drinking water sources when existing programs are insufficient. The 2016 cyanotoxin event spurred many actions locally and at the State level, including: treatment plant upgrades, creation of the Finger Lakes Hub, development of HABs Action Plans for twelve (12) NY waterbodies, and the investment of millions of dollars in watershed projects to reduce nutrient loading. Yet water quality problems related to HABs continue.

Auburn and Owasco, with initial support from the NYS DEC and DOH, began updating the Owasco Lake WRRs. A recent State Supreme Court ruling upheld the Owasco Lake WRRs. We urge the State not to appeal this decision, but instead to shift its focus to working collaboratively with the City of Auburn, Town of Owasco, and other municipalities across New York to implement updated, scientifically grounded WRRs. Our regional partner organizations have repeatedly urged the state to approve these updates, which would modernize the management and protection of this important water resource. Approval of the updated Owasco Lake WRR would be a signal to other watersheds with public water supplies, to embark on a similar process.

We do commend the state’s past expansion of regulatory approaches and voluntary programs targeting water quality, including the 1994 Agricultural Environmental Management

program, 1999 and 2009 Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations requirements, 2003 Municipal Separate Storm Sewer Systems (MS4) requirements, and 2019 Drinking Water Source Protection Program. These are critically important for water quality protection. We urge the state to significantly increase funding and staffing for their robust enforcement and implementation, such as the recent \$42M investment in the Eastern Finger Lakes Coalition of Soil and Water Conservation Districts. These investments are critical.

However, rapidly accelerating climate change driven impacts to water quality threaten to undermine progress. To safeguard our region's water, stronger protections and more targeted approaches are needed.

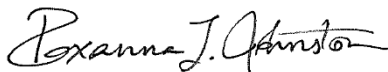
We ask the Legislature to act now to empower on-the-ground partners, municipalities, non-profits, and academic researchers by passing and funding the HABs Act and upholding the right of water purveyors to implement Watershed Rules and Regulations.

Recognizing that the schedule of this hearing overlapped with the NYS Center of Excellence's Healthy Waters Conference, which may have prevented key researchers and community members from participating under the tight timeline, we recommend adding one or more follow-up hearings or hosting more informal regional listening sessions. We believe this will broaden engagement and create the space needed to explore truly innovative approaches to HAB management.

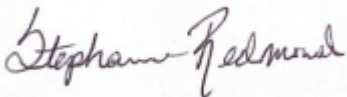
Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony on this important issue,



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Steward/Executive Director  
Cayuga Lake Watershed Network



Roxanna Johnston  
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Cayuga Lake Watershed Intermunicipal Organization



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