

Sulfur smell at Lake Helen is nature's way

Written by Elizabeth Barrett
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Bottom exposed as water drains

Residents walking, jogging or driving by Lake Helen with their car windows down may get an unpleasant whiff this week.

Especially with temperatures warming into the 50s.

A sulfur smell, or hydrogen sulfide gas, is a by-product of decaying organic matter that has built up over the years, according to consultant Paul Brakage of Lake Tech, Inc.

City officials began draining Lake Helen in mid December to create a more user-friendly body of water free of geese and other waterfowl.

As more of the lake drains through a trail race on the southwest corner, Brakage said the smell is likely to continue.

“Unfortunately this is something that goes along with these projects but I can say that I haven’t experienced long-term problems with sulfur odors,” he said.

Brakage said he’d expect the smell to be worse if there was a thick layer of muck on the lake bottom.

However sediment core samples indicate a fairly hard bottom, he said.

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The odor is not a health hazard, Brakage said, noting that the concentration of hydrogen sulfide released is not high enough.

"It's a naturally occurring process," he said.

Brakage said lakes produce sulfur odors naturally when water turns twice a year.

Water near the bottom brings organic decay odor as it rises to the top, usually in April or early May and mid September into October, he said.

The good news is that temperatures are not in the 90s, he said, which would create a much stronger and fouler smell. Fish will be seined as the lake drops and taken to the city landfill.

"Because fish will be picked up, the odor will be less," he said.

Nebraska Game and Parks officials were going to salvage game fish in Lake Helen but decided there weren't enough to justify their efforts, Brakage said.

City officials should hear next week whether or not \$308,301 in Nebraska Environmental Trust Foundation funds will be awarded to the Lake Helen project.

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