

Many farmers still need training after Lake Erie algae

January 22 2017, by John Seewer

Ohio's agriculture leaders say thousands of farmers have completed training that will be required for putting fertilizer on fields, but many more face a September deadline to finish the program aimed at combating the toxic algae fouling Lake Erie.

The first of its kind requirement is one of several steps Ohio has taken to reduce the farm runoff that feeds algae in the state's lakes and rivers.

State lawmakers put the measure in place in 2014, just months before algae in Lake Erie contaminated the drinking water for more than 400,000 people in northwestern Ohio and southeastern Michigan.

They gave farmers three years to be certified for commercial fertilizer use on more than 50 acres of farmland. So far, about 12,000 farmers and workers who apply commercial fertilizer—mainly phosphorus and nitrogen—have been certified, said Dave Daniels, director of the state's agriculture department.

An estimated 6,000 to 10,000, he said, still need to finish the three-hour course—how many exactly is difficult to pin down because some farmers hire contractors to apply their fertilizer.

Ohio State University Extension says it will offer about 200 training sessions this year in nearly every county.

Daniels, who attended one of the first sessions a few years ago, said he

found almost no one wanted to be there.

But surveys of participants show that almost all say they learned something that will help them save money and improve the environment, he said.

Research has shown that about one-third of farmland doesn't need additional fertilizer and that farmers could save thousands if they realized this, Daniels said.

"They may walk in with a bad attitude, but they walk out with something they can go home with that will really help them with their operation," said Greg LaBarge, a field specialist with Ohio State University who helps oversee the training.

Kris Swartz, who farms just south of Toledo and is active with soil and water conservation groups, said the mandatory training at least forces farmers to look at issue even if they're resistant.

"Most farmers are resigned that they have to do it, a lot of them want to do it and some of them are looking at it as one more hurdle," he said.

Environmental groups that have been critical of the state's efforts to combat the algae say Ohio is relying too much on voluntary efforts that encourage using the right amount of fertilizer at the right time and the right place,

The state doesn't intend to punish [farmers](#) right away if they're not certified by the end of September, Daniels said.

But if someone is found to be putting [fertilizer](#) on their fields without a license and refuses to get the certificate there is the option of seeking misdemeanor charges, he said.

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