

Pond Algae

Pond scum! No I'm not talking about any of the people in Teton County. Every time I drive between Fairfield and Choteau, I pass Freezeout Lake and think about the mystical formations in the water. Since we have been getting some warmer weather, I have been receiving some calls about algae formations in ponds. I thought a little biology refresher would be useful in helping us to understand what is happening in our ponds and stock water dams.

We never seem to have much algae growth in the winter months. Algae needs several things to successfully develop. The first is a stagnant body of water. Any fresh water that continuously flows into a pond or stock water dam would disrupt the anaerobic conditions. In essence, algae thrives when you have a closed, stagnant body of water.

Like other growing organisms, algae responds to nutrients. Many of the fields that surround ponds are full of cereal grains. Every year, producers fertilize these crops with nitrogen. Nitrogen runoff from the crop fields reacts with the sunlight to form the algae. You may notice that the algae forms heaviest near run off or next to wheat or barley fields.

There are three basic methods to reduce pond algae. The first is to create aeration in the water, either naturally or artificially. This will reduce or eliminate the anaerobic conditions that exist. The second method is one familiar to many livestock producers. By applying some copper sulfate crystals to the water, the algae reacts negatively to this and dies out. Some ponds and dams are of such a size to make this not entirely feasible. Crystals can be found at most ranch and farm supply stores.

The third method is inexpensive and more feasible for ponds. By placing bales of barley straw, you can reduce the algae. Enzymes in the straw (particularly barley straw) react with the algae and reduce the concentrations. I recommend placing a bale every 20 - 40 feet where concentrations of algae are heaviest.

I suppose I could mention a fourth method - wait for winter! Conditions will improve as it gets colder and eventually as we have runoff from the mountain

snows. Please keep these hints in mind to help you control algae for next season as well. It's not too late to try and control algae for this season. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at the Extension office. I always look forward to the variety of questions that come in and as always, I'll do my part to get good information out.