

AGRICULTURAL RUNOFF

Nutrient runoff from agricultural fields fuels excessive algae growth in the Great Lakes, causing harmful algal blooms. These blooms can make water toxic to fish, wildlife, and people; create “dead zones” where fish and other aquatic life can’t survive; increase downstream costs of treating drinking water; harm the regional economy; and prevent recreation on the lakes. In August 2014, a harmful algal bloom in Lake Erie left more than half a million people in Toledo, Ohio, without safe drinking water for nearly three days.

Nitrate pollution from fertilizer and manure also contaminates drinking water, particularly for the people in our region who rely on private wells that draw from groundwater. Growing research shows that long-term exposure to nitrate, even at levels below the 10mg/L federal drinking water standard, may be linked to serious health concerns, including certain cancers and pregnancy complications. Households often bear the cost, needing to drill a new well, install treatment systems, or purchase safe drinking water. These challenges disproportionately affect rural families who are not connected to public water systems.

Reducing nutrient runoff, particularly phosphorus and nitrogen, is critical to protecting the health of the Great Lakes and the communities that depend on them.

Sample candidate questions:

- How would you support funding for conservation programs and other solutions that reduce agricultural runoff into local waterways?
- What specific actions, standards, and/or policies would you support to reduce nutrient runoff from agricultural lands, which pollutes our local waters?
- Billions of dollars have been invested in voluntary programs to reduce agricultural runoff, yet harmful algal blooms persist. What would you do differently to ensure that these investments produce measurable water quality improvements and make better use of taxpayer dollars?
- Do you believe voluntary conservation programs alone are enough to reduce agricultural runoff, or should stronger standards be considered to protect water quality?
- How will you ensure that the public has access to transparent information about whether nutrient pollution in our waters is actually improving?
- Do you support programs that would assist residents in installing new wells or water treatment systems if their drinking water is contaminated with nitrate?

