



Testimony of Jared Carpenter
Water Protection Advocate, Lake Champlain Committee
Before the House Natural Resources, Fish & Wildlife Committee
April 12, 2017

Good Afternoon, Chairman Deen and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for inviting me to testify on H211, an act relating to the water resources and water supplies of the State. The Lake Champlain Committee supports the goals of H211 to protect public health and water quality, however, we have some logistical and financial concerns with the proposed changes to the cyanobacteria monitoring program.

The Lake Champlain Committee (LCC) is a bi-state nonprofit working for a clean, accessible lake since 1963. We use science-based advocacy, education and collaborative action to protect water quality, safeguard natural habitats, provide access and foster stewardship. LCC is the home organization for the Lake Champlain Paddlers' Trail and, in 2003, initiated the Lake Champlain citizen cyanobacteria monitoring program. The program has grown every year and we now monitor over 100 sites on Lake Champlain and also provide monitor training and oversight for several inland Vermont lakes.

§1686 of H211 seeks stricter monitoring and reporting of drinking water violations. Each year there are discharge violations from wastewater treatment plants of untreated water and septage into our lakes and rivers. Many of these discharges occur into rivers in the Lake Champlain Basin and therefore ultimately impact Lake Champlain.

The timely notification of these discharge violations is key to protecting public health. It does little good for those swimming, boating, and fishing in our rivers to learn twelve hours or a day later that a discharge occurred upstream. By that time, recreationists on lakes and rivers may have already been exposed to higher bacteria levels. The necessary equipment upgrades could be included as a part of the basic capital upgrades and modernization that many facilities must undertake.

However, LCC has some logistical and financial concerns with the language added to **§1222 Cyanobacteria Monitoring and Notification**, as our organization performs approximately 85% of this monitoring on Lake Champlain. These concerns include the increase in cost to extend the program and the lack of volunteers in the fall months to perform the assessments.

LCC launched the citizen cyanobacteria monitoring program on Lake Champlain in 2003 in partnership with the University of Vermont and the Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation. VT DEC has had oversight of the statewide effort since 2012. Currently, the program is a collaboration amongst LCC, VT DEC and the Vermont Department of Health. Data is gathered by state and LCC staff and an extensive network of volunteer monitors recruited and trained by LCC. The volunteers leverage state resources providing areal coverage and report frequencies which would be difficult to obtain using only state personnel. The point of the cyanobacteria monitoring program is to raise awareness of the issue, build a database of information on bloom frequency and be sure that any potential health hazards are recognized and avoided. It must be noted, however, that while state funds cover a portion of the Vermont Department of Health's staffing and lab analysis for the program, the VT DEC and the Lake Champlain Committee receive no state funds for their cyanobacteria monitoring work.

We obviously agree that monitoring and public notification of cyanobacteria blooms is very important, or else we would not have initiated the citizen monitoring effort. The proposed language in the section reads, “[t]he Commissioner [of Health] shall conduct cyanobacteria monitoring or shall collect monitoring data for cyanobacteria in the waters of the State between June 1 and November 1 annually.” We are not against the extension of the current monitoring period in and of itself but we are concerned about the increased logistics and cost.

The joint cyanobacteria monitoring program that LCC, VT DEC and the Dept. of Health coordinate integrates qualitative observations, photographic documentation and quantitative analysis of cyanobacteria populations into guidance for lake users. Once received, reports are vetted by LCC and state partners and posted on the cyanobacteria data tracker housed on the Dept. of Health's website which is accessible to anyone with internet access.

Currently, the LCC volunteer monitoring period runs from mid-June to the end of September. VT DEC , however, monitors 15 Lake Champlain sites bi-monthly from June 1 to mid-October. LCC handles the recruitment, training and support of the volunteer monitors. Most of our monitoring

starts in mid-June to coincide with the opening and staffing of the municipal beaches and increased recreational use of lakeshore areas. Similarly, monitoring is reduced after Labor Day when many state parks, public recreation areas and campsites close and contact recreation with the lake diminishes.

For the 2016 monitoring session, LCC produced and updated a series of resource materials including online videos, offered 19 training sessions and trained 275 volunteer monitors, interested citizens, and municipal and state park personnel. We also assisted with trainings for drinking water facility operators and health officers. Throughout the summer, we also hold other public information sessions and distribute materials to educate people on the threat of cyanobacteria, what to do if they observe a bloom, and actions to take to reduce bloom frequency. Last year, LCC staff and volunteers reported from over 106 locations on Lake Champlain and 12 locations on Vermont inland lakes. Collectively, LCC volunteer monitors submitted an average of 79 observations per week, with report frequency heavier during the heart of the summer and tailing off on either end in keeping with the seasonal use and opening and closing of park and beach areas. Of the nearly 1,400 site-specific reports submitted, 85% came from LCC volunteers.

Both LCC's and VT DEC's cyanobacteria monitoring work is funded through the Lake Champlain Basin Program (which is federally funded) with LCC also securing private donations. While our funding is secure for the 2017 season, the Lake Champlain Basin Program has been zero-funded in the proposed 2018 federal budget. Needless to say, we don't know whether federal funding will continue at the needed level, or at all. If the Legislature expands the monitoring requirements into November, an adequate appropriation from the general fund should accompany it. Otherwise, LCC and VT DEC will be forced to dilute our monitoring throughout the summer months to compensate. Additionally, the state agencies should have flexibility to determine the number and location of monitoring sites during the shoulder season periods.

In conclusion, LCC supports the monitoring and notification of discharge violations from wastewater systems that unexpectedly and repeatedly pollute Vermont's lakes and rivers. And, again, while we are not opposed to the expansion of cyanobacteria monitoring into November, we do have concerns about logistics and costs as to who would perform this expanded monitoring and how it would be financed.