

Senator Pam Helming

Representing the 54th New York Senate District



IMMEDIATE RELEASE: June 17, 2022
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A column from State Senator Pam Helming

Protect the Health and Future of the Finger Lakes

by Senator Pam Helming

There's nothing like summer in the Finger Lakes! Whether you love family time at the beach, kayaking or canoeing, fishing for bass, or boating with friends, there's something for everyone to enjoy here this time of year.

It's up to all of us to keep the Finger Lakes vibrant and healthy.

Water is one of the most valuable resources we have. We depend on our 11 Finger Lakes and Lake Ontario for clean drinking water, the health of our families and communities, business attraction and economic growth, agriculture, tourism, and recreation.

In recent years, our lakes have had outbreaks of cyanobacteria, commonly called toxic algae or harmful algal blooms (HABs). These HABs are one of the biggest threats to water quality in the Finger Lakes. And they can harm people and animals.

Since 2017, all 11 Finger Lakes have experienced at least one outbreak of HABs. For most of the lakes, it happens regularly each year. These outbreaks are most common in the summer and early fall, when calm, warm water conditions make it easier for algae to grow.

Last October, several Finger Lakes experienced one of the most intense HAB outbreaks in recent years. This occurred on a single day, impacting Seneca, Cayuga and Canandaigua Lakes the hardest, but also Skaneateles, Honeoye, Owasco and Keuka.

I love our lakes and waterways, and I've enjoyed working with many area partners to protect them. As members of the Canandaigua Lake Watershed Association, my husband and I monitor water quality by conducting regular secchi disk readings. We've even recruited the third generation of our family, our 3-year-old granddaughter, to help us!

As a legislator, I've worked with Finger Lakes Land Trust and local farmers to preserve almost a thousand acres of farmland. Most recently, I was proud to be part of a bipartisan effort to preserve an undeveloped 470-acre parcel of land on Cayuga Lake, including 3,400 feet of pristine shoreline.

This month, in another bipartisan team effort, we opened the first boat washing station at Canandaigua Lake State Marine Park to help prevent the spread of aquatic invasive species. Thank you to New York State Parks, New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC), the Town and City of Canandaigua, Town of Gorham, Canandaigua Lake Watershed Association, Canandaigua Lake Watershed Manager, Finger Lakes Institute, and Finger Lakes Partnership for Regional Invasive Species Management (PRISM).

As State Senator, I'll continue to advocate for state resources to help our communities and water quality partners prevent and mitigate the threat of HABs in our region. This year, the Senate passed a bill I co-sponsor which would give communities more authority to protect their local waterways from aquatic invasive species.

Legislation was also enacted this year to allow the DEC to protect an additional one million acres of freshwater wetlands to support a healthy environment and clean drinking water.

We can all help care for our lakes. Report suspicious algal blooms on the state DEC website. Pick up pet waste. Properly dispose of unused medication and household hazardous waste. Use a local car wash instead of cleaning your car in the driveway. Practice lake-friendly lawn care and avoid harmful chemicals.

Also, consider volunteering with your local lake or watershed organization. Maybe even get your children or grandchildren involved as I have!

Check out the Finger Lakes Regional Watershed Alliance, Lake Friendly Living Coalition of the Finger Lakes, and Finger Lakes Land Trust for more helpful information.

The Finger Lakes is internationally renowned for its beauty and bounty. We are so fortunate to call this our home. Let's all work together to protect and preserve our lakes for generations to come.

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