Seneca Lake Pure Waters Association
P.O. Box 247
Geneva, NY 14456
SLPWA@senecalake.org

November 23, 2015

Howard A. Zucker, M.D., J.D., Commissioner
New York State Department of Health
Corning Tower
Empire State Plaza,
Albany, NY 12237

Dear Commissioner Zucker:

The Seneca Lake Pure Waters Association (SLPWA) requests your assistance to improve the monitoring and reporting of sodium content of Seneca Lake, a drinking water source for 100,000 people in Ontario, Schuyler, Seneca, and Yates Counties. Seneca Lake has the highest salinity of all the Finger Lakes. According to data from John Halfman, Ph.D., from the Finger Lakes Institute, sodium concentrations are 80 mg/L in Seneca Lake and only 20 mg/L in the other Finger Lakes. Thus, Seneca Lake presents a unique problem for public health.

In addition, SLPWA requests that DOH notify the public and health practitioners about the potential health impacts of the elevated sodium levels in the lake. In the face of significant levels of sodium levels in the lake, limiting notice only to those on public water supplies seems inadequate. When there is a health warning about a drinking supply, the Annual Water Quality Report should not be the only vehicle. There are thousands of people using lake wells or in Non Transient, Non-Community systems that are not getting this notice.

In preparing an application to the State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) to designate Seneca Lake as a priority water body, because of salinity (chloride and sodium levels), SLPWA became aware that the public water supplies in Watkins Glen and Hector (Schuyler County) on Seneca Lake were not testing for sodium. Other water supplies, Geneva, Waterloo, Ovid and Willard are testing for sodium and report levels 4 times the guidance value of 20 mg/L. The Watkins Glen and Hector plants are at the southern end of the lake very close to operating salt plants located in Watkins Glen and Reading, as well as numerous plugged wells and salt wells used for natural gas storage, all on the shore of Seneca Lake. These plants should begin testing and public notification, immediately. See attached map.

Samples from a full-lake cruise on October 25, 2014 conducted by Finger Lakes Institute were run for sodium, chloride and specific conductance at both the Finger Lakes Institute (Halfman) research lab and a commercial lab, Community Science Institute, Inc. Those results demonstrate that the sodium levels, at the surface and the bottom, of the lake are 4 times the allowable amount in all locations, so this is not a localized issue and affects the whole lake. (http://people.hws.edu/halfman/Data/PublicInterestArticles/An%20Update%20on%20Major%20Ion%20Geochemistry%20in%20Seneca%20Lake,%20NY.pdf)

The at risk populations, infants and adults with kidney disease, hypertension, and other sodium-sensitive conditions such as congestive heart failure and their treating physicians should be provided this information promptly, from the State Department of Health. Because so many people are not on public water and draw their water from lake wells, they should be informed as well.

The Seneca Lake Pure Waters Board looks forward to working with your department to notify the public of this risk and to assure testing for sodium is conducted at all community and non-community non-transient water supplies using Seneca Lake as their source.

Very truly yours,

Mary Anne Kowalski

President

CC:

Basil Seggos, Acting Commissioner
New York State Department of Environmental Conservation
625 Broadway
Albany, NY 12233-1010

Seneca Lake Water Supply and Salt Mine Locations

The blue arrows are the water treatment plants that ARE testing for sodium and their most recent results. These plants are issuing a warning annually.

The orange arrows are the community water supplies that are NOT testing and/or reporting. No warnings are issued.

The green arrows are the two salt plants.