

Copper Compounds

Chemical Fact Sheet

Formulations

Copper has been used as an aquatic herbicide and algaecide since 1950. Copper compounds for aquatic use are manufactured either as copper sulfate, or as a copper chelate. Both forms contain metallic copper as the active ingredient, but in the chelate forms the copper is combined with other compounds to keep the copper in solution and active in the water longer. Chelated copper is also less toxic to non-target organisms.

There are copper sulfate products available as fungicides and other terrestrial uses, which are not allowed for use in water. Aquatic copper products are sold under a variety of brand names, including Nautique™, Komeen®, Captain™, K-Tea™, Eartheq®, Cutrine®-Plus, Clearigate® and SeClear (product names are provided solely for your reference and should not be considered endorsements nor exhaustive).

Aquatic Use and Considerations

Copper products are primarily used to treat algae but certain formulations will affect some plants, as well. The target species vary by product, so it is important to confirm that the intended target is listed on the label of the product being used.

Copper works by interfering with enzyme production. Results from treatments for algae occur within hours, while the effects of treatment on plants will be evident in about a week. Large-scale algae die-off can deplete oxygen levels in the water quickly, which can be lethal to fish and other aquatic life. If more than a 1/3 of the total water area is covered in algae, treatments should be done in sections, and applied in a pattern that allows fish an escape route to untreated water. Ten to fourteen days are needed between treatments to protect fish and aquatic life.

Copper products will treat blue-green (free-floating) algae and filamentous (mat-forming)



algae as well as larger algae species that look like plants, such as *Chara* spp. and *Nitella* spp.. In Wisconsin, copper is not typically used to treat aquatic plants, but some are labeled to treat the invasives Eurasian watermilfoil (*Myriophyllum spicatum*) and curly-leaf pondweed (*Potamogeton crispus*), as well as the native species coontail (*Ceratophyllum demersum*), naiads (*Najas* spp.), elodea (*Elodea canadensis*), sago pondweed (*Stuckenia pectinata*) and water celery (*Vallisneria americana*).

Determining the correct copper formulation and calculating the proper dosage are key factors in determining how well copper will control undesirable algae. Applicators need to consider target species, water hardness, water temperature, amount of algae present, as well as water clarity and flow.

In hard or alkaline waters, copper sulfate tends to settle to the bottom within 24 hours after application. Chelated copper remains in solution longer, allowing for a longer contact time with the algae.

All copper formulations can be toxic to some species of fish at recommended application rates, especially if the water has less than 50 ppm (parts per million) of carbonate hardness (soft water). However, toxicity generally decreases as water hardness increases.

Post-Treatment Water Use Restrictions

There are no restrictions on swimming, eating fish from treated water bodies, human drinking water, pet/livestock drinking water, or irrigation.

Herbicide Degradation, Persistence and Trace Contaminants

Copper is an element, and so is not broken down like other herbicides. Copper precipitates out of the water over a few days and settles into the sediments, where it persists indefinitely and accumulates over time. The buildup of copper in lake sediments is a serious concern, because high concentrations of copper in the sediment are toxic to both plant and animal life.

Impacts on Fish and Other Aquatic Organisms

Copper sulfate is rarely used in Wisconsin, in part due to its high toxicity to invertebrates (water fleas, crustaceans, mollusks, mayflies, snails, and crayfish) and multiple species of fish (trout, bluegill and minnow) at typical application concentrations. The chelated forms of copper have different toxicology profiles from each other and from copper sulfate.

The chelated copper products can also be toxic to fish at application rates, particularly to trout and bluegill in soft water ($\text{CaCO}_3 < 50\text{ppm}$). Applications to harder water provide a greater margin of safety to fish.

Many of the chelated copper products are also toxic to invertebrates at application rates. High concentrations of copper in lake sediment can be toxic to invertebrates that live on the lake bottom, as well. These invertebrates are an important source of fish food.

Copper does temporarily accumulate in fish, but more in the gills and the liver than in muscle tissue. The copper in fish tissues are reduced once the copper level in the water is reduced.

The EPA risk assessment for birds and small mammals (based on dietary consumption) indicates that some risk may be present to birds or mammals at the worst-case scenario. However, this maximum dietary exposure scenario is likely much higher than the exposure

level that might occur to birds when copper is released into the environment as an algaecide. Birds, like humans, can physiologically acclimate to higher concentrations of copper in order to slow its uptake. Studies of copper's effects on birds have shown to be toxic at high levels; however, effects at standard treatment levels have not been shown to be harmful. Studies have shown that even at low levels (.07ppm) copper sulfate can have detrimental effects on amphibians, including slowed growth rates, decreased mobility and death. Effects on reptiles have not been documented.

Human Health

The risk of acute exposure to copper is primarily to chemical applicators. The acute toxicity risk from oral and inhalation routes is minimal; however concentrated copper products can be corrosive to the eyes and cause irreversible damage. Prolonged or frequent skin contact can cause allergic reactions in some people. Goggles, protective clothing, and rubber gloves are required when handling.

Even with regular use for many years, very few chronic health concerns have been documented. In one study agricultural applicators of copper were found to have some signs of liver damage, and there is some evidence that high copper may impair immune function. Copper is not carcinogenic.

For Additional Information

Environmental Protection Agency
Office of Pesticide Programs
www.epa.gov/pesticides

Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade,
and Consumer Protection
<http://datcp.wi.gov/Plants/Pesticides/>

Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources
608-266-2621
<http://dnr.wi.gov/lakes/plants/>

Wisconsin Department of Health Services
<http://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/>

National Pesticide Information Center
1-800-858-7378
<http://npic.orst.edu/>

