

1 Who smells? Forecasting taste and odor in a  
2 drinking water reservoir with phytoplankton genus  
3 data

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10 KEYWORDS taste and odor, forecasting, random forest, water treatment

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12

13 **ABSTRACT**

14 Taste and odor problems can impede public trust in drinking water, and impose major costs on  
15 water utilities. The ability to forecast taste and odor events in source waters, in advance, is  
16 shown for the first time in this paper. This could allow water utilities to adapt treatment, and  
17 where effective treatment is not available, consumers could be warned. A unique 24-year time  
18 series, from an important drinking water reservoir in Saskatchewan, Canada, is used to develop  
19 forecasting models of odor using physical, chemical, and biotic predictors. We demonstrate,  
20 using linear regression and random forest models, that odor events can be forecast at 0-26 week  
21 time lags, and that the models are able to capture a significant increase in odor threshold number  
22 in the mid-1990s. Models with a fortnight time-lag show high predictive capacity ( $R^2 = 0.71$  for  
23 random forest; 0.52 for linear regression). Predictive skill declines for time lags from 0 to 15  
24 weeks, then increases again, to  $R^2$  values of XX (random forest) and XX (linear regression) at a  
25 26-week lag. Results of the random forest model demonstrate that phytoplankton taxonomic  
26 data outperform chlorophyll a in terms of predictive importance. .

27

## 28 INTRODUCTION

29

30 Few people want to drink smelly water that tastes funny. It is therefore unsurprising that taste  
31 and odor compounds in drinking water have significant social and economic effects (Vaughn,  
32 1967). Smell and taste are the primary ways people assess the quality and safety of their drinking  
33 water, and as such, the occurrence of taste and odor compounds (TOCs) in treated water can  
34 erode public confidence in drinking water safety (McGuire, 1995). Furthermore, TOC's may  
35 reflect anthropogenic degradation of water quality (Watson, 2004). While no national estimate of  
36 the cumulative costs of taste and odor issues exists, it is estimated that consumers shifting to  
37 bottled water, associated with TOCs, could cost the US economy more than \$813 million  
38 annually (Dodds et al, 2008), and the cost associated with treatment of these problems could be  
39 much higher (Srinivasan and Sorial 2011). In Buffalo Pound Lake, a drinking water reservoir in  
40 Saskatchewan, Canada, removal of TOCs is estimated to cost \$\$/annum, or X% of the annual  
41 treatment costs (REF). Besides affecting drinking water, TOCs also spoil the taste of fish –  
42 creating major issues in the aquaculture industry (Tucker, 2000).

43

44 Taste and odor compounds are produced by a number of different phytoplankton and bacteria  
45 genera. Cyanobacteria and actinobacteria produce two of the most problematic TOCs: geosmin  
46 (trans-1, 10-dimethyl-trans-9-decalol) and MIB (2-methylisoborneoyl). Both compounds are  
47 recalcitrant to common treatment options (Srinivasan and Sorial, 2011) and can be detected at  
48 extremely low concentrations (Suffet et al, 1999). Amongst the cyanobacteria, only filamentous  
49 genera have been found to produce geosmin and MIB (Juttner & Watson, 2007). Like

50 cyanobacteria, only a subset of actinobacteria produce geosmin and MIB (Zaitlan & Watson,  
51 2006). Actinobacteria are commonly assumed to contribute to aquatic taste and odor via runoff  
52 from soils into surface waters. However, actinobacteria can also function within aquatic  
53 environments and, for example, can produce MIB by using phytoplankton as a carbon source  
54 (Sugiura et al, 1994). Diatoms and chrysophytes can also produce taste and odor compounds. In  
55 their case, the TOCs are produced as a result of enzymatic degradation of polyunsaturated fatty  
56 acids via bacteria, when the algae die (Watson, 2002). These TOCs are more easily degraded  
57 than geosmin and MIB and as a result, tend to be a lesser issue for drinking water treatment. As  
58 with cyanobacteria and actinomycetes, only particular species of diatoms and chrysophytes are  
59 associated with TOCs. One notable species of diatom producing TOCs is *Cyclotella* -- a common  
60 constituent of spring blooms in temperate lakes which can produce sulfur-based TOC's. Beyond  
61 these microbial sources there are a number of other compounds which can cause taste and odor  
62 issues. These include pesticides and other pollutants, and chemicals used in treatment (Young et  
63 al, 1996).

64

65 The development of models for predicting or forecasting taste and odor events has been  
66 hampered by a lack of long-term time series. To date most studies have used linear regression  
67 models that contain common parameters associated with phytoplankton productivity (e.g.,  
68 chlorophyll a, turbidity/water transparency, and total phosphorus) to predict concentrations of  
69 taste and odor compounds (Smith et al 2002, Mau et al 2004, Sugiura et al 2004, Christensen et  
70 al 2006, Dzialowski et al 2009). This linear modelling approach has been extended to non-linear  
71 models, which include a broader range of parameters, including microbial abundance data  
72 (Parinet et al 2010, Parinet et al 2013). Most recently, non-linear models have been developed

73 that include detailed measurements of hydrodynamics and phytoplankton data with a view to  
74 incorporation in hydrodynamic models (Bruder et al 2014). However, all of these models are  
75 based on short-term datasets which can make assessment of model performance and relationships  
76 among variables difficult.

77

78 In this paper, we develop, for the first time, forecasting models of odor in a drinking water  
79 source. The largest yet published time series of odor dynamics is used to calibrate and validate  
80 random forest and linear regression models. The modelling objective was to predict odor  
81 threshold number a fortnight in advance as this is a timescale which allows preparation of  
82 treatment options and public warning if needed. The time scales upon which odor can be  
83 predicted is also assessed. Finally, the uncertainty of the models predictions is also quantified.

84

## 85 **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

86

### 87 **Study site and data description**

88

89 Buffalo Pound Lake (Saskatchewan, Canada) (Figure 1) is a eutrophic reservoir that supplies  
90 drinking water to approximately 1/4 of the population of Saskatchewan. The lake is shallow (4  
91 m), narrow (5 km), and long (35 km). Originally a natural lake, the installation of a dam in 1939  
92 means it is best characterized as a reservoir. Motivated in part by persistent issues with taste and

93 odor, the Buffalo Pound water treatment plant has been monitoring a range of water quality  
94 parameters since 1977. Collected weekly, the data includes odor threshold number (OTN) along  
95 with standard water quality parameters such as chlorophyll a, total phosphorus, temperature and  
96 turbidity (methods summarized in table XX). The data also includes weekly phytoplankton count  
97 data identified to the genus level. This afforded an opportunity to identify whether  
98 phytoplankton genus abundance provides more skillful predictors than the more commonly used  
99 biogeochemical parameters. In this study, we restrict our analysis to periods where complete  
100 weekly data for the parameters of interest were available. This meant that possible predictors,  
101 nitrate and ammonia, were excluded from the models (due to variation in measurement  
102 frequency). Furthermore some phytoplankton data is missing and so some years were excluded  
103 due. Nonetheless, despite these shortcomings, 1251 weeks (24 years) of data were left with  
104 which to calibrate and validate forecasting models.

105

## 106 **Odor threshold number**

107

108 Odor threshold number (OTN) is an indicator of water odor, determined using serial dilutions  
109 with odor-free water (ASTM D1292-10). Multiple trained individuals (an odor panel) are asked  
110 to report the first dilution at which the odor can be detected. Despite analytical advances that  
111 now allow the detection of individual TOC compounds at very low concentrations, OTN remains  
112 a common method for determining the magnitude of taste and odor compounds (Rigal et al,  
113 1995). Advantages of this method include low cost, simplicity (with no complex instrumentation  
114 requirements), and generality – that is -- all compounds perceptible to the odor panel are

115 reported, rather than having to test for the tens of compounds that can cause taste and odor  
116 (Young et al, 1996). Furthermore, if water is from a common source and proper standardized  
117 procedures are followed, variation in human perception is similar to the variation of direct  
118 chemical analysis (Bousquet 1983). As noted, the development of odor models has been  
119 hampered by short time series, which is related to high cost, relatively recent development of  
120 analytical techniques, and methodological changes. As a result, OTN data constitute a valuable  
121 long-term source of information on odor problems where records and consistent methodology  
122 have been maintained.

123 Temperature, total phosphorus, turbidity, Chlorophyll a, algal genus!!!! Hi Helen, just  
124 undeleted these so you have a list for the table.

125

## 126 **Model Development**

127

128 The dataset was filtered to exclude parameters, and time periods for which weekly data were  
129 not available. Due to missing phytoplankton data the periods 1985-1987 and 1993-1995 were  
130 omitted from the model. This left 1251 weeks with which to construct the models. The  
131 following 9 predictors were then chosen for our model-based analyses: Chl a, turbidity, total  
132 phosphorous, and algal count data for the following taxa: *Anabaena* sp., *Aphanizomenon*  
133 sp./*Oscillatoria* sp., *Chlorella* sp., *Cyclotella* sp. and *Astrionella* sp. *Aphanizomenon* sp. and  
134 *Oscillatoria* sp. data were combined because the data record had them sometimes recorded  
135 separately and sometimes together. Linear (regression) and non-linear models (random forests)

136 were calibrated and validated (90-10% split) on randomized subsets of the total dataset. This  
137 calibration/validation process was repeated 1000 times in order to quantify the uncertainty  
138 resulting from the choice of calibration and validation dataset. This randomized calibration and  
139 validation was conducted at time-lags of 0 to 26 weeks to quantify how the predictive  
140 performance of the models varied with the forecast time-lag and determine whether the  
141 predictive importance of different variables changed over time. Finally, a student t-test was  
142 carried out to test reports of a significant increase in OTN since approximately 1997.

143

144 The model construction methodology contained elements which were similar for both the linear  
145 regression and random forest models, as well as some which were different. In what follows the  
146 linear regression and random forest models are described, then the general procedure used to  
147 calibrate, validate and measure model performance is explained in detail.

148 The linear regression model constructed according to equation 1:

149 
$$y(t) = \sum_{i=1}^{n=9} x_i(t) \alpha_i + \beta \quad (\text{equation 1})$$

150 Where  $y(t)$  is the predicted OTN values,  $\beta$  is bias, and  $\alpha_i$  are the respective regressors of each of  
151 the  $n=9$  predictor variables  $x_i(t)$ . Uncertainty in model predictions was calculated at the 95%  
152 confidence level. The primary purpose of using a linear model was to provide a baseline against  
153 which to compare the non-linear random forest model. The R package ‘lm’ (R core team, 2014)  
154 was the implementation used for all linear regression modelling.

155

156 Random forests are a machine learning method which constructs a non-linear function based on  
157 the mean response of an ensemble of simpler decision tree models (Breiman, 2001). Specifically,  
158 a large number of decision tree models are independently constructed on randomly selected  
159 subsets of a training data set. Each of these simple trees is biased towards predicting their own  
160 particular training data and make poor predictors of the total dataset. However, when the mean  
161 prediction of a large number of these random trees (forest) is calculated they produce good  
162 predictions, and are increasingly being used to model and understand environmental systems  
163 (Cutler, 1998, Kehoe et al 2010). The great benefit of this approach over other machine learning  
164 methods is generality. Increasing model complexity by adding greater numbers of trees does not  
165 lead to a model which perfectly fits the training data, rather the models predictive performance  
166 tends to asymptote with a general diminishing return in predictive performance as more trees are  
167 added (Breiman 2001). This feature means that random forests require no assumptions as to the  
168 complexity of the data on the part of the modeler and so are very useful for discovering hidden  
169 relationships with data, free from a priori assumptions. Furthermore, thanks to the ensemble  
170 approach there is a natural way of estimating predictive uncertainty. Because each tree makes a  
171 prediction, estimation of uncertainty is straightforward. Here uncertainty is reported as  $\pm 2\sigma$  for  
172 each prediction. A further advantage of random forests is that they are able to also provide  
173 information on the relative importance of different predictors. This is done by considering how  
174 prediction accuracy changes when a given parameter is excluded from the model (here,  
175 calculated as the average reduction in mean square error). All random forest models were  
176 developed within R statistical software with the ‘randomForest’ package (Liaw and Weiner,  
177 2002).

178 The same general procedure was followed for the development of both the linear regression and  
179 random forest models. For each model type a random 90% subset of the available dataset was  
180 chosen to be for calibration with the remaining 10% reserved for validation. Models were then  
181 calibrated and validated using procedures for each which are outlines below. The  $R^2$ :

182 
$$R^2 = 1 - \frac{\sum_{i=1}^n (y_i - f_i)^2}{\sum_{i=1}^n (y_i - \bar{y})^2}$$
 (equation 2)

183

184 then being calculated and recorded. This process was then repeated 1000 times in order to  
185 quantify the uncertainty related with the choice of calibration and validation data sets but also to  
186 gain insight into the uncertainty in the importance measure of the random forest algorithm.

187

## 188 **RESULTS**

189 Odor threshold number varied both annually and inter-annually over the data record (Figure 1).  
190 In particular, OTN was significantly higher in 1998-2011 compared to 1980-1997 ( $p < 0.001$ ), and  
191 although the most significant annual peak is in August, April is when OTN first increases after  
192 its winter minimum. This coincides with the ice-melt period and the spring phytoplankton  
193 bloom.

194 Both random forest and linear regression modeling techniques led to good model fits for the  
195 validation data (Figure 2). The random forest was the better of the two at each time lag (based  
196 on  $R^2$ ); however, the linear regression model predicts the calibration and validation datasets to  
197 similar accuracy (within the 95% confidence levels) at every time lag. The random forest model

198 tended to over-predict the calibration dataset compared to the validation dataset at each time lag  
199 (Figure 2). Both models showed greater uncertainty in prediction of validation dataset compared  
200 to the prediction of calibration dataset (Figure 2).

201 The random forest model ( $R^2=0.71$ ) was a better predictor on average of the validation dataset  
202 compared to the linear regression model ( $R^2 =0.52$ ) at the fortnightly time lag (Figure 2).  
203 However, the non-linear random forest model predicts the calibration dataset more accurately  
204 than the validation data set. The linear model in comparison predicts both the calibration and  
205 validation dataset to a similar level of accuracy (Figure 2). This shows that fair comparison of  
206 the predictive ability of different models should only be done on datasets not used in model  
207 training or parameter estimation. Also, as noted above, the uncertainty bounds on sensitivity due  
208 to choice of calibration data set are small compared to the linear regression model. In addition to  
209 fitting the data well, the random forest and linear regression model (not shown) are both able to  
210 capture interannual and decadal variation in odor threshold number including a significant  
211 increase in the mid 1990's.

212 The least important predictor in the random forest model was almost always chlorophyll a,  
213 with the exception of the 0-3 week time lags when total phosphorus and *Astrionella* sp. were the  
214 least important. *Chlorella* sp., *Cyclotella* sp., and *Aphanizomenon* sp. / *Oscillatoria* sp. were  
215 consistently better predictors than chlorophyll a. *Anabaena* sp. was more important at most time  
216 scales except between 11-13 week time-lag where it was similar or equal in predictive  
217 importance to chlorophyll a (both approximately 0.1% MSE). Finally *Astrionella* sp. was better  
218 at every time lag except from 0-3 weeks where it became progressively worse and is only able to  
219 reduce mean square error on average by 0.07% compared to 0.13% for Chlorophyll a at 0 week  
220 time lag.

221 The variation in relative importance of different predictors over time revealed a number of  
222 patterns. Temperature had two peaks in predictive importance at 8 weeks (0.3% MSE) and 26  
223 weeks (0.45% MSE). Total phosphorus decreased in importance as time lag declined, from a  
224 high of 0.21% MSE at 26 weeks' time lag to a low of 0.09% at 0 weeks' time lag. Except for a  
225 small decline from 26 week to 24 week time lag, turbidity, increased in importance as time lag  
226 reduced and was the second most important predictor behind *Chlorella* sp. at time lags shorter  
227 than 3 weeks. *Anabaena* sp. had peaks in predictive importance at 20 week and 0-5 week time  
228 lag. Finally *Aphanizomenon* sp. /*Oscillatoria* sp. (6 weeks) and *Astrionella* sp. (15 weeks) had  
229 unimodal peaks in relative importance.

230

## 231 **DISCUSSION**

232

233 This study reports the first fully validated and operational forecasting model of odor for a  
234 drinking water reservoir. In particular, it is first model to investigate predictive performance at  
235 different time lags; previous models only predict odor events at the present time. Critically, the  
236 model is able to capture a large ten year long increase in odor threshold which begins in 1998;  
237 this appears to be related to an increase in abundance of filamentous cyanobacteria and  
238 *Chlorella*. In addition, the model captures a recent (2008-2012) decline and plateau in OTN.  
239 The ability to predict odor at long time lags, as demonstrated here, suggests that long-term  
240 ecological processes are important in driving odor production.

241

242 Due to the long time series of weekly OTN data, rigorous calibration and validation of models  
243 was possible. The large data set also meant the uncertainty in model predictions and associated  
244 statistics, such as  $R^2$  and importance, could be evaluated. Previous modelling studies on odor  
245 have been based on relatively short time series of common odor causing compounds: geosmin  
246 and MIB. As a result, more limited data has been available for model calibration, and model  
247 validation has only been rarely performed (see table S1).

248 Given the complexity of odor production processes (Bruder et al. 2014), it is likely that  
249 different predictive models will have to be developed for different systems; however, key  
250 insights can be gleaned by comparing model predictors across ecosystems. To date, we have  
251 identified 13 models associated with 7 studies that had the explicit goal of prediction of odor,  
252 although all, with the exception of this study, are restricted to real-time prediction (i.e. present  
253 day or week). Of these studies, 6 of the 13 models included temperature as a predictor variable,  
254 9 of the 13 included a nutrient, and only 3 included chlorophyll (Table S1). The two studies to  
255 date using algal taxonomy data (Bruder et al. 2014; this study) had the highest predictive  
256 capacity of models reported to date. Results of importance analyses (Figure 4) demonstrated that  
257 phytoplankton taxonomic data had far greater utility than measurements of chlorophyll a, and,  
258 despite the time-consuming nature of algal counts, where odor prediction, and understanding  
259 long-term ecological change are important (as they are in many bloom-affected reservoirs), clear  
260 value of taxonomic data is demonstrated.

261

262 *Anabaena* sp., *Oscillatoria* sp., *Aphanizomenon* sp. were all important predictors of odor.  
263 They are all cyanobacteria, and all have species which have been proven to produce geosmin.

264 *Astrionella* sp and *Cyclotella* sp. are associated with odorous alkenes which are produced when  
265 they decay after death (Watson 2004). However, the dominance of *Chlorella* sp. as a predictor in  
266 our modelling results is surprising given it has not been demonstrated to produce odor. We have  
267 two hypotheses. The first is simply that Buffalo Pound Lake contains a strain of *Chlorella* sp.  
268 which may actively produce TOCs, or lead to their production upon death and decay. The  
269 second is that abundance of *Chlorella* sp. is a proxy for actinobacterial activity. It has been  
270 shown the actinobacteria are able to use carbon fixed by *Chlorella* sp. to produce taste and odor  
271 compounds (Sugiura et al 1994).

272

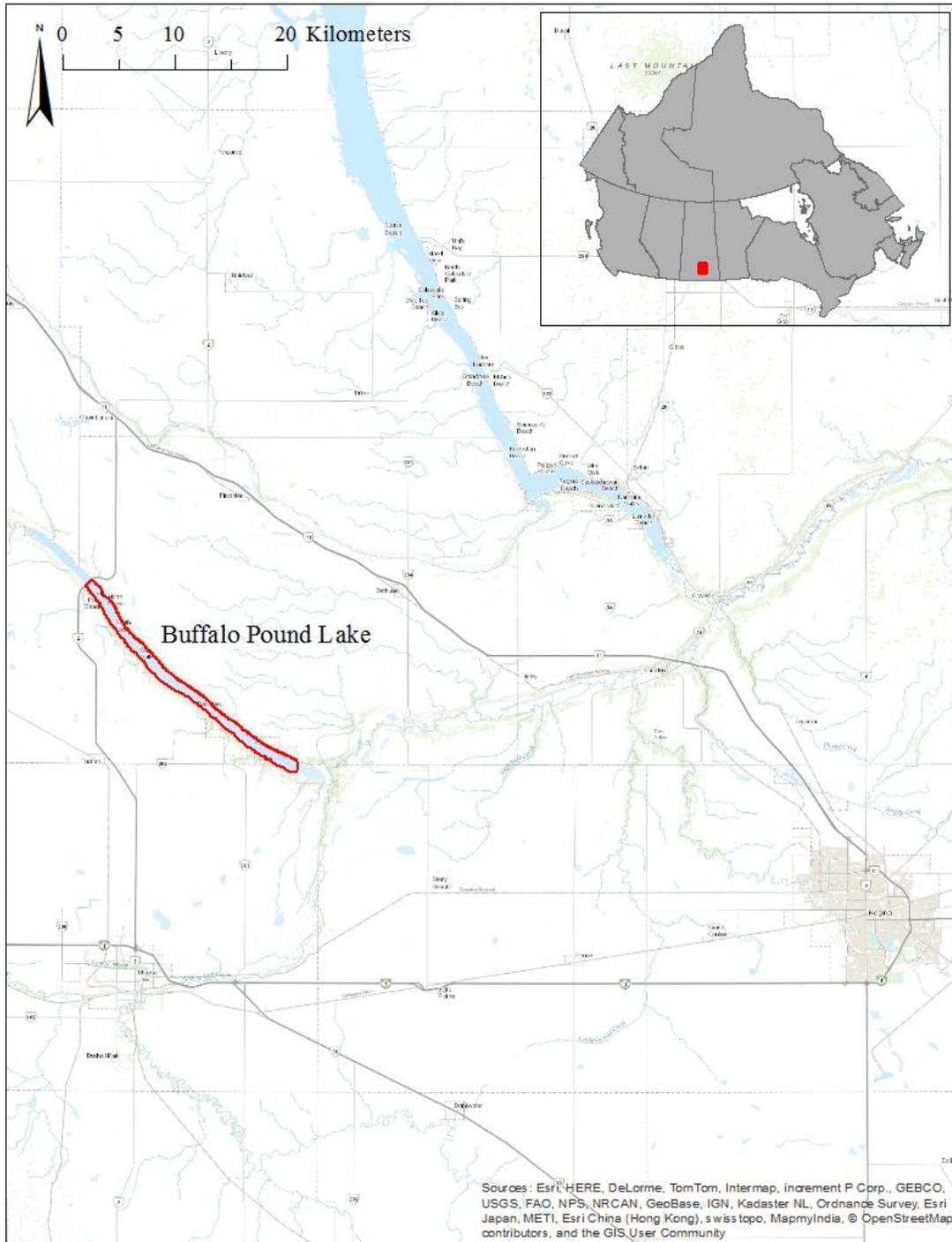
273 Forecasting models, like the one presented here, can help inform planning for water treatment  
274 utilities, allowing optimization of treatment, and helping to minimize costs. Addition of activated  
275 carbon is the primary way taste and odor problems are managed (REF); however, this process is  
276 expensive, and there is the potential for cost savings with advance warning. Prediction also  
277 means the public can be warned of possible taste and odor issues ahead of time - increasing  
278 confidence in water treatment organizations. Models like the ones presented here allow managers  
279 to assess the likelihood and expected magnitude of odor problems well in advance. In particular  
280 the approach taken here would allow a manager to start dealing with, and tracking, odor  
281 problems 6 months in advance.

282

283

284 FIGURES

285 **Figure 1.** Map of Buffalo Pound Lake and its location within Canada.



286

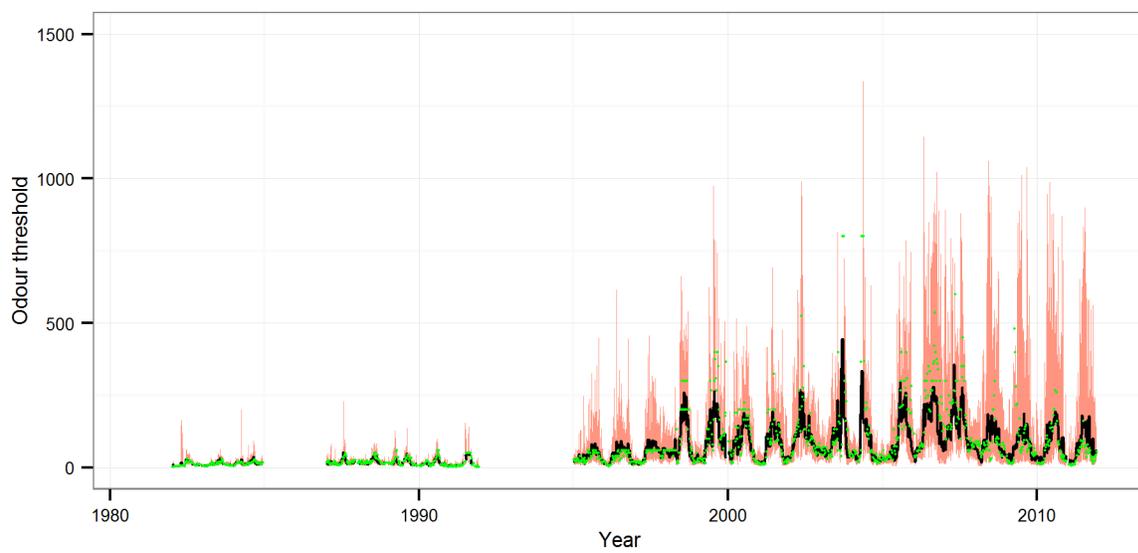
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290 **Figure 2.** Time series plot of odor threshold number data (bright green dots), model predictions  
291 (black line) and 95% confidence interval of predictions (coral ribbon).

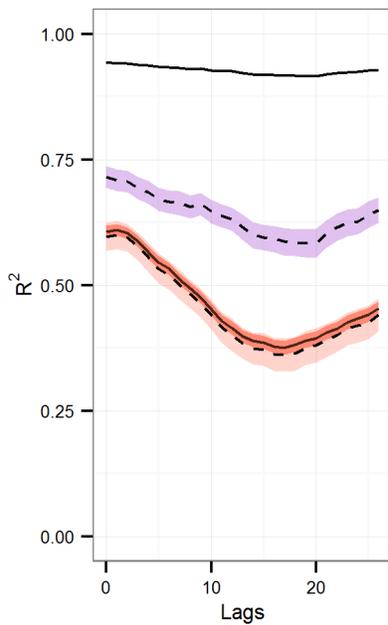
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294

295 **Figure 3.** Predictive accuracy as measured by  $R^2$  for different time-lags. The light purple ribbon  
296 is the random forest model  $R^2$  performance on validation data (dashed-line is the mean value,  
297 ribbon is  $\pm 2\sigma$  from mean) while the dark purple ribbon is the random forest model  $R^2$  performance  
298 on calibration data (solid-line is the mean value, ribbon is  $\pm 2\sigma$  from mean). The light coral ribbon  
299 is the linear model  $R^2$  performance on validation data (dashed-line is the mean value, ribbon is  
300  $\pm 2\sigma$  from mean) while the dark coral ribbon is the linear model  $R^2$  performance on calibration data  
301 (solid-line is the mean value, ribbon is  $\pm 2\sigma$  from mean).

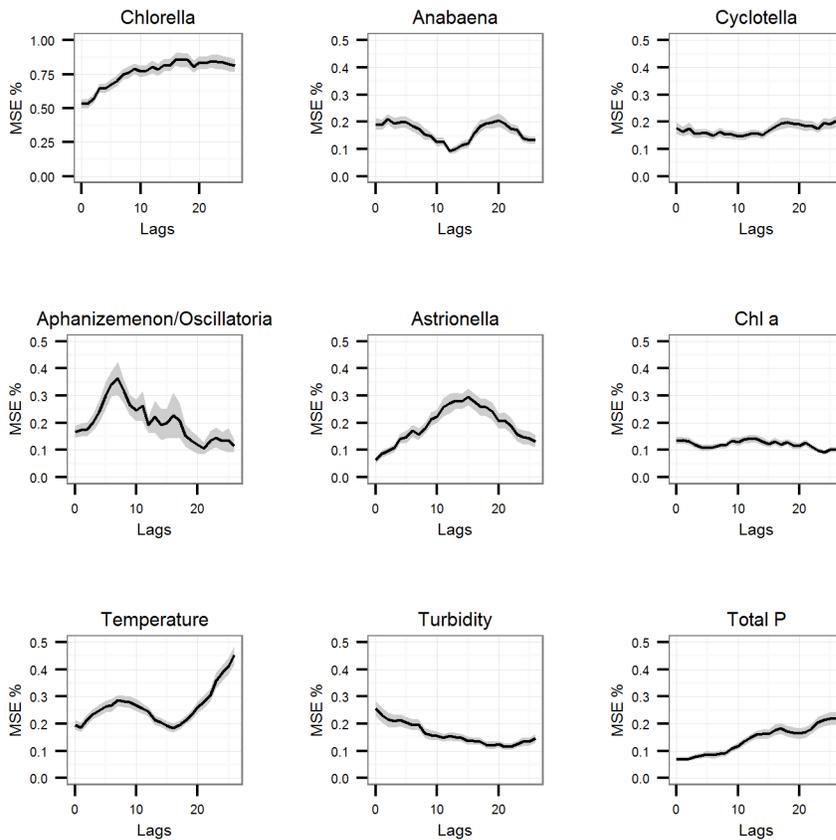


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304 **Figure 4.** Ribbon plots of the relative importance of different predictors at different time-lags.  
305 Importance is measured as the mean reduction in mean square error as a result of using the  
306 predictor. Model was run 5000 times on randomized selections of calibration validation data set to  
307 generate estimates of 95% confidence interval as  $\pm 2\sigma$  from mean.

308



309

310

Study	Response Variable	Prediction Variables	Model type	Calibration R <sup>2</sup> (data number)	Validation R <sup>2</sup> (data number)
Christensen 2006	Geosmin	Turbidity (FNU), specific conductance	Linear	0.71(18)	NA(NA)
Smith 2002	Geosmin	Chlorophyll <i>a</i>	Linear	0.72(6)	NA(NA)
Mau 2004	Geosmin	Secchi depth, specific conductance, turbidity (NTU)	Linear	0.70(16)	NA(NA)
Sugiura, 2004	MIB	Water temperature, silicic acid, chemical oxygen demand	Linear	0.59(64)	0.26(32)
Sugiura 2004	MIB	Water temperature, silicic acid, chemical oxygen demand	Artificial neural network	0.65(64)	0.27(32)
Sugiura, 2004	Geosmin	Total phosphorus, chemical oxygen demand, dissolved oxygen	Linear	0.45(64)	0.28(32)
Sugiura 2004	Geosmin	Total phosphorus, chemical oxygen demand, dissolved oxygen	Artificial neural network	0.49(64)	0.42(32)
Dzialowski 2009	Geosmin	secchi disk	Linear	0.24(57)	NA(NA)
Dzialowski 2009	Geosmin	orthophosphate	Linear	0.25(57)	NA(NA)
Bruder 2014	Geosmin	<i>Pseudanabaena</i> spp., diatoms, <i>Plankthrothrix agardhii</i> , water temperature, salinity, and TKN	Neuro-fuzzy	0.83(102)	0.49 (10)
Bruder 2014	MIB	<i>Pseudanabaena</i> spp., diatoms, <i>Plankthrothrix agardhii</i> , water temperature, salinity, and TKN	Neuro-fuzzy	0.82(102)	0.70 (7) –three data points removed from validation set
<b>This study</b>	<b>Odor number threshold</b>	<b>Water temperature, total phosphorus, Chlorophyll <i>a</i>, <i>Anabaena</i> sp., <i>Aphanizomenon</i> sp., <i>Oscillatoria</i> sp., <i>Chlorella</i> sp., <i>Astrionella</i> sp., <i>Cyclotella</i> sp.,</b>	<b>Linear</b>	<b>0.54 (875)</b>	<b>0.52 (376)</b>
<b>This study</b>	<b>Odor number threshold</b>	<b>Water temperature, total phosphorus, Chlorophyll <i>a</i>, <i>Anabaena</i> sp.,</b>	<b>Random forest</b>	<b>0.94 (875)</b>	<b>0.71 (376)</b>

		<i>Aphanizomenon</i> sp. <i>Oscillatoria</i> sp., <i>Chlorella</i> sp., <i>Astrionella</i> sp., <i>Cyclotella</i> sp.,			
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353 acknowledge people, organizations, and financing (you may state grant numbers and sponsors  
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355 ABBREVIATIONS

356 CCR2, CC chemokine receptor 2; CCL2, CC chemokine ligand 2; CCR5, CC chemokine  
357 receptor 5; TLC, thin layer chromatography.

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