

Posted on Thu, Jul. 28, 2005

Report: Contamination a problem despite fewer beach closings

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TALLAHASSEE, Fla. - The number of days beaches around Florida were unsafe for swimming last year dipped from the year before, but officials still need to do much more to prevent high bacteria levels in the water, an environmental group reported Thursday.

The combined number of days Florida beaches health advisories were issued due to hazardous bacteria levels was 3,345, down from 3,986 in 2003, according to the Natural Resources Defense Council.

The group also named the beaches that most often had problems with high bacteria levels.

Phil Foster Park in Palm Beach County most often tested as unsafe, with 46 of its weekly tests showing high bacteria levels. Bayou Chico in Escambia County showed high bacteria levels in 36 percent of its tests, South Beach in Monroe County in 30 percent of its tests and Alligator Point in Franklin County and Dekle Beach in Taylor County in 29 percent of their tests.

"Your chances of arriving at one of these beaches on any given day are pretty good that you would find unsafe waters there," said Linda Young, southeast regional director for the Clean Water Network. "'We find that very troubling."

The cause of the contamination is most often stormwater that's drained off of streets and properties and into the ocean. The drainage often picks up overflow sewerage, animal waste, or other contaminants,

"Authorities have gotten better at finding the problem. Now they need to stop the pollution at its source by repairing and replacing leaky sewage and septic systems," Young said.

The Department of Health oversees the monitoring program and passes data about problem beaches along to the state Department of Environmental Protection.

"To figure out sources and causes and to fix things really isn't part of that program. It's a monitoring program," said Bart Bibler, bureau chief of the department's water programs.

He said he hopes that the lower number of closings indicates improvements are being made, especially since high rainfall like Florida experienced during four hurricanes last year usually raises bacteria levels off beaches.

The Department of Environmental Protection said it is working on a number of projects to improve wastewater treatment in an effort improve water quality.

"This is a long term problem and a long term solution. We believe that we have to actively manage all waterways to provide long term protection and improvements to our environment," said DEP spokeswoman Cragin Mosteller