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Collier and Lee avoided beach closures in 2004

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TALLAHASSEE — Beaches in Collier and Lee counties stayed open every day in 2004, according to a national study released Thursday tracking beach closures due to biological contamination.

In all, 3,245 beach closures or health advisories were issued for Florida beaches in 2004, a 16 percent improvement over the previous year when nearly 4,000 days were lost to unsafe levels of bacteria from human or animal waste.

Tests taken at 14 Collier sites and 13 sites in Lee, however, did not result in beach closures or public notices, a trend Collier County's chief water quality monitor says is consistent with prior years.

Environmental groups, however, say the statewide improvement though welcome masks a more fundamental question of how to further improve the quality of Florida beaches. Florida's increasingly aggressive monitoring system needs to be matched by similar resolve to stop the pollution at its source.

"Authorities have gotten better at finding the problem, said Linda Young, regional director for the Clean Water Network, in a statement accompanying the test results. "Now they need to stop the pollution at its source by repairing and replacing leaky sewage and septic systems, and cleaning up contaminated runoff."

Florida's results were part of a nationwide study sponsored the Natural Resources Defense Council, which compiled data from along the U.S. coastline and the Great Lakes. In all, the group tallied 20,000 beach closures or advisories, the most since the group began surveying beach water quality 15 years ago.

Improperly discharged sewage and untreated runoff were responsible for nearly 85 percent of the closures, but the group cautioned that improved testing may also help account for the national increase. The report, titled "Testing the Waters," can be accessed on the Internet at www.nrdc.org/water/oceans/ttw/titinx.asp.

In Florida, the beach water quality testing program began in 1998 when five of the state's coastal counties began monitoring for enterococci bacteria under a grant-financed pilot program. During the 2000 legislative session, lawmakers extended the program to 34 of Florida's coastal counties and provided funding for biweekly tests at more than 300 coastal beaches.



Garrett Hubbard/Staff

Carmen Cabarcas, visiting from Connecticut, holds her 5-year-old niece, Mariela Perez, as they get splashed by an incoming wave on the beach near Naples Pier on Thursday. Teresa Riaz, right, and Dora Frazao, far right, joined them in the surf. Unlike prior years, not a single monitored coastal beach in Collier or south Lee counties had to be closed in 2004 because of poor water quality, a federal study that tracks beach closures shows.

Two years later, the program began collecting water samples on a weekly basis with additional money from Environmental Protection Agency. The program now spends \$1.2 million a year in state and federal money to accomplish its task. Results can be viewed online at <http://esetappsdo.h.doh.state.fl.us/irm00beachwater/default.aspx>.

Collier County's water monitors says the 2004 figures are indicative of earlier test results.

"It seems that we have a problem once or twice every year or year and a half," said Jim Felix, principal environmental specialist for Collier County Pollution Control. "(The new figures) really don't surprise me. The beach water quality here is generally good."

Phil Foster Park Beach in Palm Beach County led the list of contaminated Florida Beaches. Foster Park was closed or had advisories posted 46 percent of the time. Bayou Chico Beach in Escambia County came in second and South Beach in Monroe County was third with 36 and 30 percent closures during 2004.

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