

Area beaches boost ratings on pollution scorecard

BEACHES FROM B1

territories with some form of coastline, the council found there were 19,950 days of beach closings or advisories. Florida ranked second to California, which led the nation with 3,985 days.

In the latest scorecard, Volusia County's numbers were down sharply from the 164 days of closings and advisories reported last year, which officials attributed at the time to unusually cold weather and its effect on seabirds.

Migratory birds and seagulls living off the Volusia County landfill will fly to the beach because the ocean water is often warmer than the air temperature on colder days. Their droppings lead to higher bacterial counts in the water, officials said.

"You can see it every year," said Pete Thornton, environmental administrator with the Volusia County Health Department. "When we have our coldest months, that's when our bacterial levels increase."

The days cited in Volusia County were in January and

February last year. The International Speedway beach, Silver Beach and the stretch along Florida Shores Boulevard were the most cited of the county's 15 strands, all of which are monitored.

Brevard County, with 82 miles of coastline, monitors 10 of its 27 beaches, according to the report. The NRDC had found the county has reported no closings or advisories in at least three years.

"We've got clean beaches," said Bill Jenkins, manager of the county's Environmental Health

Services. "We're in the magic spot, with good winds and not a lot of stagnant water."

Across the state, stormwater runoff, sewage outflow and septic tanks placed close to waterways in some counties add to the risk of bacterial pollution, officials acknowledge.

Last year's record four hurricanes likely increased the level of storm water carrying pollutants into Florida's neighboring ocean and gulf, but none of the officials contacted Thursday could gauge its direct impact.

Florida's Gulf Coast also has

been plagued in recent years by red tide, an algae bloom that can foul water and is often made worse by human-made pollution.

"There are a number of possible sources for the bacterial content," said Bart Bibler, water-program bureau chief for the Florida Department of Health, which oversees the \$1 million testing program, whose findings were used in the report.

After receiving a federal grant, the state's beach-monitoring program was increased from once every two weeks to weekly

in August 2002. The more frequent samplings may be contributing to the higher numbers cited the past two years — with only 1,745 closings and advisories reported three years ago.

Geography also is a factor, officials said.

"It's not surprising that the Gulf areas are more of a problem, because that's where you have more bays, inlets that can catch runoff," Bibler said.

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