

PalmBeachPost.com

POLITICS

Phil Foster tops list of contaminated beaches

By Alan Gomez

Palm Beach Post Capital Bureau

Friday, July 29, 2005

TALLAHASSEE — A Palm Beach County beach topped a rather unflattering list Thursday when an environmental group listed Phil Foster Park as the most consistently unsafe beach area to swim in last year.

The Natural Resources Defense Council released a beach-by-beach analysis that tested the levels of bacterial contamination in beachfront waters around the state. First on that list was Phil Foster Park, which showed elevated levels of human or animal waste 46 percent of the time.

The beach, located just north of the Blue Heron Bridge in Riviera Beach, was tested 200 times and found to have heightened levels 91 times.

But most troubling to Clean Water Network's Linda Young is the fact that, according to their report, the Palm Beach County Health Department issued warnings only 11 times.

"That means they didn't close the beach every time they failed the test," said Young, the network's southeast regional director. "So the real question is, 'Why not?'"

County officials agreed that the waters around Phil Foster were dangerously contaminated between January and mid-April because of a sewer line leaking into a storm drain and then into the Intracoastal Waterway.

But County Environmental Manager Barbara Hoggard said they had a standing swimming advisory throughout that three-and-a-half month span. She said a sign that read "Do not swim" and explained that there were high levels of bacteria in the water was in place throughout that time.

"I don't know where they're getting those numbers from," said Hoggard about the number of days an advisory was issued.

Other beaches in the area made the list, but less often.

Dubois Park in Jupiter recorded high levels for 14 days last year.

In Martin County, the beaches around the Roosevelt Bridge showed heightened levels of bacteria 75 times after Hurricanes Frances and Jeanne plowed through the area. Stuart Beach showed high bacteria levels for six days, as did the beaches near the Stuart Causeway and the Jensen Beach Causeway.

No St. Lucie County beaches made the list, but the report showed that only four of the county's 25 beaches are actively being monitored. Palm Beach County monitors 14 of 24 beaches, while Martin County monitors nine of 25 beaches.

The program is paid for by local and state funds, but participation is voluntary for each county and for each beach. That could explain why some areas have no contamination levels, like St. Lucie County, Young said.

The individual county health departments do the testing, which is then compiled by the State Department of Health.

Young said some areas refuse to participate because there are no repercussions, and the only thing that comes from participating is bad publicity.

"There's not really any enforcement of pollution laws in this state anymore," she said. "That's part of the problem. There really isn't any incentive for the sources of pollution to clean up their problems since there's no negative repercussions for doing so."

The data for Florida beaches are based on testing for fecal coliform and another bacterium called enterococcus.

Young and other environmentalists did take some solace in the fact that overall instances of high bacteria levels fell this year. In Florida, where the state monitors 307 beaches, elevated bacteria levels dropped from 3,986 in 2003 to 3,345 last year.

The Florida Department of Health posts monitoring results for those 307 beaches on its Web site:
<http://esetappsdo.h.state.fl.us/irm00beachwater/default.aspx>

"We need stronger enforcement for those who aren't doing their share, and we need more federal help for local communities to control runoff and update their aging sewage systems," said Nancy Stoner, director of the Natural Resources Defense Council's Clean Water Project.

The number of beach closures and advisories in the United States rose to nearly 20,000 last year, up 9 percent from 2003, according to the report by the Council.

About 85 percent of the closings or advisories were the result of hazardous bacteria levels. The bacteria came from human and animal waste in the water that could cause intestinal, stomach and ear, nose and throat ailments. Children, elderly and pregnant women are especially susceptible.

The Council has monitored the nation's ocean, bay and Great Lake beaches for 15 years, and the number of closings in 2004 was the highest yet.