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Our beaches get clean bill, but with warning

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Southwest Florida beaches almost sparkled in a water quality report released Thursday by a national environmental group — almost.

Beaches along Lee and Collier counties rarely have bacteria levels high enough to warrant health advisories, the report found.

It warns, however, the region is being plagued more and more by red tide and other algal blooms.

The annual report from the National Resources Defense Council covers beach closings and health advisories in 29 states covering both oceans, the Gulf of Mexico, the Great Lakes, bays and estuaries.

States with the biggest jump in beach water problems were Texas, Washington, Maryland, Minnesota, Michigan, New York and Illinois.

The good news for Lee and Collier counties was that they had no swim advisories due to high bacteria counts in 2004.

In Charlotte County, only one area, Port Charlotte Beach, was plagued by contamination last year. It spent 119 days under advisories.

So far this year, Lee has had 10 days of beach advisories and Charlotte 87. Collier, again, has had none.

Monroe County, which includes the Florida Keys, had the worst record among the state's beaches with 398 days of advisories.

The state as a whole had 16 percent fewer health advisories.

The council counted 3,345 beach days — one day on one beach — under advisory in Florida last year.

TESTING PRACTICES

Health officials test more than 300 beaches a week. They look for bacteria found in the feces of humans and animals that increase the risk of illness such as gastroenteritis and hepatitis for swimmers.

Generally, the bacteria spike when rain runoff picks up pollutants on the way to the Gulf.

The low number of advisories for Lee was "really good news," said D.T. Minich, who heads the Lee County Visitor & Convention Bureau.

Minich said the numbers may not allow for an accurate comparison because follow-up testing isn't done the same way in each county.

Lee County can lift its advisories faster because it has the money to retest water quickly.

"That's (tourism) funds that pay for this extra testing because we want the beaches to open as soon as those waters clear up," Minich said.

Collier County has had a few tests come back poor since the first of 2004, but retests have come back with good news.

"We believe the reason we've not had many poor beach water samples over the past year is because we have not been affected by red tide," said Ken Rech, with the Collier County Health Department. "And we do not have much industry on our rivers."

Red tide causes fish kills, which increase bacteria, he said.

PORT CHARLOTTE COAST

Charlotte County has had a problem at Port Charlotte Beach, most likely because of heavy rain runoff, said Garry Allshouse, with the health department there.

"The water quality changes with the weather," Allshouse said.

Port Charlotte Beach is on the Peace River and frequently is inundated with freshwater runoff.

It didn't faze Port Charlotte resident John Hill who was in the water Thursday afternoon.

"There are better beaches," Hill said before he took his daily dip, but he likes this one "because it's close by where I live."

On weekends, it's hopping, he said.

Hill is a little more cautious when there's an advisory.

"I go in, but I don't put my head under the water because I got an ear infection one time, and it was kind of painful," he said.

A tinny car radio played oldies near two couples hanging out at a picnic table nearby.

"I had my grandchildren out here Monday, and they had a blast," said Tina Walker. "If I thought for a moment this water was nasty, I wouldn't let them in."

RED TIDE ON RISE IN LEE

The Natural Resources Defense Council singled out Lee in its report, saying red tides and red-drift algae, a nontoxic seaweed that littered beaches knee-high last year, are getting worse.

The report linked the problems to wastewater discharges and nutrient discharge. An example is the massive amount of water being released from Lake Okeechobee to lower the lake's level.

Minich and the tourism bureau are lobbying to get those flows managed differently because the water degrades beaches and fishing here and could threaten the county's annual \$2-billion tourism industry.

State and federal agencies in charge of the lake have said the blooms come naturally in cycles and there is no evidence flows from the lake make red tides worse.

The nature of these red tide episodes is changing, though, said Mark Dorfman, the study's principal author.

In the past, red tides often originated offshore due to certain natural conditions.

Now, the toxic tides are blooming near shore and drifting offshore, according to the report. It cites an ongoing study by Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institution in Fort Pierce.

"That suggests they are being generated by nutrient pollution," Dorfman said.

DIRTY FINDINGS OVERALL

Nationwide, recreational beaches are getting dirtier and more dangerous, according to the council.

The organization's annual report found 20,000 days lost to beach closings and health advisories last year due to beach water contamination. That's a 9 percent increase from 2003 and the largest number of closings and advisories since the group began tracking the problem 15 years ago.

The increase is partly due to more widespread monitoring and reporting of water contaminants, the report's authors say, but it also shows a lot of pollution could endanger swimmers.

"Overall, the trends are negative," said Nancy Stoner, director of the resource council's Clean Water Project.

— The News Press bureau reporters Paul Flemming and Larry Wheeler contributed to this report.
