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Opinion

Clean beaches are money in the bank

- Southwest Florida shores remain relatively free of bacteria, but keeping it that way requires vigilance.

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There's some good news for Southwest Florida about our beaches, but like most good environmental news, it contains a warning: We will have to be more conscientious and tough-minded about the environment if we expect to keep our beaches on this happy path.

Waters along beaches on this coast remain relatively free of dangerous bacteria. Only six of the 35 beaches tested in Lee, Collier and Charlotte counties have had to be closed to swimming in the past year and a half, according to a report from the Natural Resources Defense Council.

But the council warned, among other things, that red tide and red drift algae outbreaks are an increasing threat to the state's beaches.

Clean beaches are enormously important to our tourist economy and to the outdoor way of life cherished by so many locals. Beach pollution is both a public health and an economic threat.

We chalk the good news up to a mix of luck and wisdom. For one thing, we are not yet as densely populated as other coastal areas in Florida and elsewhere.

And because so much of our development is relatively recent, more rain runoff has been managed in the modern fashion, to reduce its polluting impact.

We also are in the expensive process of converting vast areas from septic tanks, which create environmental havoc when too many crowd into an area, to safer, less polluting central waste disposal systems.

CITIZEN ACTION

We'd also like to think that more people are paying attention to the seemingly little things in their lives (see the accompanying list of clean water tips) that can make a huge beneficial difference as population grows.

But this can change. If we allow development to outrun nature's ability to sustain it, if rain runoff, for example, contains too much pollution from oily streets and over-fertilized lawns and golf courses, the bacterial pollution of our water and beaches is inevitable.

There are some very worrisome signs. For one, we have been unwilling to adopt some of the measures that will be necessary to keep our water clean.

For example, Lee County commissioners tried 15 years ago to establish a stormwater utility, which would put systems in place to clean up rain runoff, but protests by property owners killed the idea. The county

tried again in 1998 with a referendum, but it failed.

DIRTY LAKE

Another fear is that the mighty plumes of polluted water being released from Lake Okeechobee will create a disaster in the Caloosahatchee River and its estuary in Lee County, and may eventually threaten our beaches as well.

Water managers insist this water has not contributed to outbreaks of toxic red tide that kill fish and irritate human respiratory systems, or of red drift algae that can accumulate in stinking piles on beaches. So far, the proof is lacking that this water is a culprit, but we cannot dismiss the possibility.

Our healthy water and clean beaches are treasures.

We had better beware of any threats to them and take action.