

Environment

South Florida Sun-Sentinel Editorial Board
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ISSUE: With spotty exceptions, Florida beaches appear cleaner.

We've got a lot riding on our shoreline, so it's good to see the quality of beach water improve. Still, there's plenty more to be done.

According to the Natural Resources Defense Council, Florida beaches posted 3,345 days worth of closings and advisories in 2004 due to bacterial pollution. That number is a 16 percent decrease from the year before, but it's still too high for a state that derives much of its livelihood and quality of life from its coasts.

It's worrisome that the beach with the worst tally for bacterial contamination is in our back yard, in Riviera Beach. What's worse, Palm Beach County officials don't exactly know why the waters at Phil Foster Park failed to meet health standards so often.

Speculation centers on a variety of potential culprits, from ineffective tidal currents to waste from vessels that anchor nearby. County parks and health authorities need to find the answer quickly, and to develop strategies to clean the water.

Despite the long shoreline, South Florida generally lacks adequate public access to beaches. It's simply unacceptable that one option for beachgoers ranks at the bottom of water quality testing.

Broward beaches showed a dramatic improvement in bacteria readings, but that's largely due to changes in testing sites. Four beaches accounted for just nine days' worth of advisories, down from 200 in 2003, largely because Intracoastal Waterway sites are no longer tested.

The report comes as Florida's representatives in Congress fight hard to keep oil drilling away from waters around the state. The state can help keep the rigs away by doing its best to keep its beaches as clean as possible.

The Council's report highlights where the work needs to begin.

BOTTOM LINE: The report shows progress, but the results are unacceptable for a beach-focused state.

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