

South Florida Sun-Sentinel

BROWARD METRO EDITION

NWS/C

FRIDAY | JULY 29, 2005

Local

SOUTH FLORIDA

NWS • FRIDAY, JULY 29, 2005 5B

Survey identifies polluted shores

Worst bacterial contamination is in Riviera Beach.

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A popular stretch of Riviera Beach shore ranked as Florida's worst for bacterial contamination last year, according to an environmental group report released Thursday.

The Natural Resources Defense Council's nationwide survey of beach water quality tallied 3,345 days of beach closings and health advisories in Florida during 2004, a 16 percent drop over the previous year, the group said.

But the annual guide to safe swimming singled out a beach in Phil Foster Park, inside the Intracoastal Waterway beneath the Blue Heron Boulevard bridge, as the stretch of Florida sand most plagued with bacterial pollution during 2004.

The 7-acre park, closed to swimmers in recent months because of hurricane damage and renovation, is county owned and maintained.

While water samples pulled from beaches statewide exceeded public-health standards 3 percent of the time, Phil Foster Park failed 46 percent, the report states. Ninety-one of 200 park water samples checked by state health officials failed safety requirements, said Linda Young, southeast regional director of the Clean Water Network.

"That's shockingly high," Young said, "and in a part of the state where so many people are trying to use the beaches."

Most of Florida's poorer-performing shorelines were on the Gulf of Mexico, mainly in the Florida Keys and Panhandle, according to the report called *Testing the Waters*.

Broward's dramatic decrease stemmed from a change in testing locations, officials said.

The Florida Health Department stopped testing sites on the Intracoastal Waterway, where pollution from stormwater runoff and boats can become concentrated, said Steve Dennison, environmental manager for the Health Department's Broward County office.

Few people swim in the Intracoastal, so testing was expanded along other beaches, he said.

Young says counties are finding ways around problem spots.

"They move their tests to places that aren't as polluted. They choose times to test that are better... so their problems don't show up. They don't have to post the beaches. I don't think it's fair to the public."

The nine days of Broward health advisories were posted along Hugh Taylor Birch State Park, Custer Street in Hollywood, Dania Beach pier and Northeast 16th Street in Pompano Beach, according to the beach-water report.

Palm Beach County checks the water at 14 beaches weekly. Health, park and environmental officials said investigations of the Phil Foster Park bacteria problem have not identified a cause.

"It's certainly something we're concerned about, something we're addressing," said Dennis Eshleman, county director of parks and recreation.

Bacterial pollution tainting beach water can come from various sources, including septic tanks, sewer pipes, storm drains, boat discharges and wildlife.

Palm Beach County had 11 days of beach closings or advisories last year, down from 16 in 2002. That number in Broward County fell from 200 in 2003 to nine last year.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

The Florida Department of Health reports the results of beach water-quality samplings for 34 coastal counties. All counties have links to data collected since August 2000: <http://esetappsdo.h.doh.state.fl.us/firm00beachwater/default.aspx>