



Water Study Shows Bacteria Levels Often Exceed E.P.A. Standard

By Bryley Williams | July 27, 2017 - 4:41pm

Stormwater runoff onto the ocean beach at Surfside Place in Montauk earlier this year showed potentially harmful bacteria at a level more than 130 times greater than a federal health standard. Colleen Henn, Surfrider Foundation Eastern Long Island Chapter

A study has found that one in five South Fork waterways tested between 2013 and 2016 had bacteria levels above a federal health standard at least 40 percent of the time.

During the summer months, volunteers from the Concerned Citizens of Montauk and Surfrider Foundation Eastern Long Island Chapter Blue Water Task Force sample up to 52 sites from Westhampton to Montauk each week. The samples are processed at the C.C.O.M. Montauk office and at the Stony Brook University Southampton campus.

In the study, the Surfrider's Blue Water Task Force explained that the primary sources of water pollution on the South Fork are failing septic systems and cesspool and animal waste.

A surf movie night to help pay for Surfrider's water testing work will be held on Wednesday at 7 p.m. at Guild Hall in East Hampton.

According to an analysis released this week by the Surfrider Foundation, three sites in Lake Montauk exceeded the health standard for the enterococcus bacteria in 44 percent of the tests, with the high numbers primarily occurring in June, July, and August. At Surfside Place in Montauk, which drains through a pipe onto the ocean beach, 70 percent of the tests were above the acceptable level.

Over the three years analyzed by C.C.O.M. and the Blue Water Task Force, samples from Pussy's Pond in Springs and the Georgica Pond kayak launch off Montauk Highway exceeded the safe standard more than half the time.

A stormwater outfall pipe at the Montauk Shores Condominium in Montauk exceeded the standard in 39 percent of the tests between 2013 and 2016.

Fort Pond Bay in Montauk exceeded the standard 16 percent of the time.

In the winter, sites are tested biweekly or monthly. Each sample costs about \$10 to collect and process, according to Colleen Henn of Surfrider, who prepared the 2013-16 study. Together, the C.C.O.M and Blue Water Task Force testing expenses add up to about \$10,000 a year, according to the organizations. About 700 samples are taken on the South Fork annually.

The Concerned Citizens of Montauk has urged residents and businesses to have their septic tanks and cesspools pumped regularly or upgraded. East Hampton Town and Suffolk County are working on rebate programs for residents in close proximity to wetlands and waterways who replace outdated or failing wastewater systems.

E.P.A. Standard

Enterococci come from the intestines of warm-blooded animals. A presence of the bacteria in water signifies that fecal matter and harmful pathogens, which can lead to infections and disease in humans, can be present.

Most South Fork waters have relatively low bacteria counts, under the Environmental Protection Agency health standard of 104 colony-forming units, or viable cells or clumps of cells, per 100 milliliters of water. However, the C.C.O.M.-Surfrider work has consistently pointed to certain hot spots.

Among the bathing beaches with elevated enterococcus bacteria levels reviewed in the study was Fresh Pond in Amagansett, at which 39 percent of the samples between 2013 and 2016 were above the level considered safe. In results released by the Concerned Citizens this week, the bacteria count at the bay beach there was at 121 per 100ml of water and the shallow, warm creek popular with the parents of small children was 6,131, a spike caused by a recent rainstorm, Kate Rossi-Snook of the Concerned Citizens said.

Rain plays a significant role in bacteria levels. In Lake Montauk, the average enterococcus count at a west-side site increased from 102 to 1,637 after a rainfall; at South Lake Beach, the level increased from 14 to 123.

In East Hampton Village's Nature Trail, which flows into Hook Pond, enterococcus levels sampled by a volunteer were 2,279 units on June 19 and 14,136 units on July 17. They had fallen to 589 in a test this week.

Circle Beach in Noyac had a high bacteria level of 426 in a test sample taken on Monday. Sagg Pond in Sagaponack had levels rated high on Monday and July 17. Surfrider works with the Peconic Baykeeper organization to test waters in Southampton Town.

High bacteria levels were also recorded at Settler's Landing and Folkstone Creek at Three Mile Harbor on Monday, and at 2,445 units per 100ml on June 5 on the East Hampton Village Green.

Open Water

Beaches generally have lower bacterial presences than closed bodies of water. This is because any bacteria entering a large, moving ocean or open bay will be quickly diluted. Ocean beach bacteria counts were above the health standard in, at most, 3 percent of the C.C.O.M.-Surfrider samples. However at the Georgica Association ocean beach in Wainscott on Monday a sample tested at 107 units per 100ml, just above the level considered potentially harmful.

C.C.O.M. and the Blue Water Task Force have advised the public to swim only at ocean or open-bay beaches where there are lifeguards on duty, and to not enter the water 24 to 48 hours after rainfall, to not wade in streams or touch runoff at the beach, to not enter areas where there are blue-green algae bloom warning signs posted. They also recommended swimmers rinse off with freshwater before eating or leaving the beach, if possible.

Weekly results are posted via a link on the Concerned Citizens website, preservemontauk.org, and for Southampton Town, at surfrider.org/blue-water-task-force/chapter/49.

The Suffolk Department of Health Services has a seasonal water monitoring program and posts warnings about beach closures at suffolkcountry.gov.