By Kitty Merrill

Test samples taken from water bodies in East Hampton during the week of September 18 showed extremely high levels of enterococcus. Sampling took place during the effects of Hurricane Jose, which included flooding from persistent extreme high tides and strong northeast winds. Kate Rossi-Snook, environmental advocate for the Concerned Citizens of Montauk theorized, “I suspect that flooded surfaces (animal wastes on land) and groundwater saturation (inundated septic tanks and cesspools), in combination with no true low tide to flush out the waterways led to the shockingly high bacteria levels this week.”

Of 26 sites sampled, 19 tested far above the national standard for enterococcus. Enterococci are bacteria that live in the intestinal tracts of warm-blooded animals, including humans. Presence of the bacteria in water can be an indicator of fecal waste contamination. According to Rossi-Snook, high concentrations can be attributed to pet and animal waste, runoff, and groundwater saturation related to septic systems that are not well maintained, or, as with last week, the effects of a hurricane.

National health standards consider over 100 colony-forming units per 100 ml indicative of high bacterial presence, Rossi-Snook explained. Results from the David’s Lane duck pond in East Hampton Village revealed the highest concentration, at 10,462. Also topping the thousand mark were the east creek leading to Lake Montauk (2382), Fort Pond Bay at Tuthill Road (1162), the creek at Fresh Pond in Amagansett (1012), Pussy’s Pond in Springs (3873), the beach side of Georgica Pond (1470), Georgica’s Cove Hollow access (1198), and the Settler’s Landing section of Three Mile Harbor (4884). Still more samples tested well over the 100 unit threshold.

For the last four years the Concerned Citizens of Montauk, in collaboration with Surfrider Foundation’s nationwide Blue Water Task Force, has been sampling water bodies in the Town of East Hampton for the presence of the bacteria. Numbers fluctuate and can be dependent on the temperature of the water, the population, and the level of precipitation.

A review of weekly samples taken since the beginning of June demonstrates which water bodies consistently tested over the 100-unit threshold. While none listed in the thousands as with last week’s hurricane effect, many tested at levels between 300 and 600 on a regular basis throughout the summer.

Some weeks, none of the water bodies revealed high numbers. Out of the 11 summer weeks when high numbers did appear, they appeared most often in creeks running into Lake Montauk (eight times), Pussy’s Pond in Springs (four times), Georgica Pond (four times), Hook Pond in East Hampton (twice), and Fresh Pond in Amagansett (twice).

Weighing in on the overall testing for the summer and the program since its inception, Rossi-Snook said, “Four years of bacterial testing in East Hampton waterways has given us valuable insight into the patterns of when enterococcus levels are elevated and pose a health risk – rain, flooding, population density, for example – but more needs to be done. Using these data as a foundation we can move beyond just being aware of the problem, towards implementing effective actions that target the source of pollutants to ensure the continued human and ecological health of our waters.”

Water samples taken from creeks leading to Lake Montauk tested for shockingly high levels of bacteria.