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## Bradford is dirtiest city beach

### Bacteria also high at others

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Bradford Beach surfaced as Milwaukee's dirtiest beach during last year's swimming season, in a new analysis, while all three of the city's Lake Michigan beaches posted more days with dangerous bacteria levels in 2004 than the two prior years.

E. coli bacteria counts at Bradford exceeded safe levels for 61% of the three-month swimming season, according to the city Health Department review. But the picture wasn't much better at McKinley and South Shore Park beaches in 2004, with high bacteria counts for 52% and 56% of the season, respectively. The figures were based on 98 days of testing starting in late May.

Put another way, if you took a swim on any given day last summer at any of the city's beaches you had a better than 50-50 chance of dousing yourself with E. coli - a type of bacteria commonly linked with fecal material - at potentially unhealthy levels.

The Health Department recommends no swimming on days when E. coli counts exceed 235 units per 100 milliliters of water, following a standard set by the federal government.

Bradford also had some of the highest daily E. coli counts in '04, with tallies of 10 times or more the danger level on 18 days scattered throughout the summer, according to data collected by the Health Department.

That compares with South Shore, which had E. coli readings of 10 times the danger level on 10 days, and McKinley with readings that high on eight days, the city figures show.

The 2004 beach pollution figures far exceeded those for '03, when Bradford had high bacteria readings 27% of the season, McKinley had high readings for 15% of the season and South Shore's figure was 26%.

In 2002, South Shore had the worst pollution, with dangerously high readings 65% of the swimming season. Bradford had high readings for 45% of the season and McKinley posted high readings for 34% of the season.

## **Cause, effect elusive**

Affixing blame for the bad beach pollution last year is tough for scientists because of the large number of variables that affect beach bacteria, said Paul Biedrzycki, manager of disease control and prevention for the Milwaukee Health Department.

"This demonstrates that there is variability outside our current level of understanding," Biedrzycki said, when asked to explain the reasons for last year's beach bacteria spike.

However, he said some of the change can be traced to heavier rains in 2004, which flushed more pollutants off parking lots, streets and upstream farm fields. In addition, the Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District dumped at least 1.7 billion gallons of untreated sewage during heavy May 2004 rainstorms, according to its most recent estimates.

Researchers say runoff pollution is likely a major culprit, but that doesn't mean sewer overflows get a pass. Disease-causing organisms contained in human sewage continue to make overflows the most worrisome of the beach pollution sources, said Sandra McLellan, a scientist at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's Great Lakes Water Institute.

## **'Horrible and unacceptable'**

State Rep. Jon Richards (D-Milwaukee) called the beach pollution findings "horrible and unacceptable," but he said he was encouraged by studies that suggest runoff from storm sewers, along with overflows of Milwaukee's combined sanitary/storm sewers and bird droppings, may be playing a big role.

Interpreting just what the high bacteria readings really mean to personal health, however, remains a bit elusive. E. coli is used as a warning for the possible presence of disease-causing organisms, but a high reading doesn't necessarily mean you'll get sick.

"E. coli itself is not a health hazard, it's just an indicator of fecal pollution," McLellan said. "It's really a general cleanliness issue."

Since attacking E. coli is the best strategy researchers have come up with so far, local efforts have concentrated on ways to drive down those numbers.

## **Regrading beach**

The entire expanse of Bradford Beach was re-graded this spring, in part to smooth depressions that had formed over the years. Those turned into mini-ponds after rainstorms and provided an ideal growth environment for bacteria-laden storm water runoff, McLellan said.

In addition, Monday-through-Friday grooming of Bradford and McKinley beaches with new equipment is aimed at killing bacteria by exposing it to sunlight. The job replicates an earlier effort in Racine, which resulted in a 20% to 30% reduction in beach advisory days, Biedrzycki said.

Scientists have learned that contrary to earlier theory, bacteria not exposed to direct sunlight can survive in beach sand for long periods.

Less intensive grooming also will be done at other Milwaukee County beaches, and Milwaukee Service Corps crews will remove cladophera algae deposits. Large rotting mats of cladophera have accounted

for the bad smell at some spots along the lakeshore, most notably just north of Bradford Beach.

Also, new devices that filter storm water from the parking lot area at South Shore Beach will be tested in the next couple of weeks after rainfall, McLellan said.

In addition, regular sweeping of parking lots adjacent to McKinley and Bradford beaches might be advisable, McLellan said.

More expensive fixes remain under advisement. For example, Milwaukee County officials are studying whether several storm sewer pipes that discharge near Bradford Beach should be relocated or if runoff from them can be cleaned or diverted using a cheaper method.

MMSD continues to tackle nearly \$1 billion in long-range projects designed to curb sewer overflows, but it also is contributing \$50,000 to the beach grooming effort and \$15,000 toward the South Shore Beach project.

So, what should you do if you're contemplating a romp at the beach with the kids?

"If a beach has been consistently closed or it has just rained and you know storm water has gone to the site, you might want to stay away from it," McLellan said.

Through Monday, all Milwaukee beaches were posted good for swimming.

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