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Study rakes pollution stories

Researchers say coverage distorts beach problems

By STEVE SCHULTZE and MARIE ROHDE

sschultze@journalsentinel.com

Local news accounts have given the public a faulty impression that sewage dumping is the major cause of beach pollution, according to a new report by researchers for the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's Great Lakes Water Institute.

The "content analysis" of 48 news and opinion articles about beach pollution by Sandra McLellan and Erika Jensen found 40% of the stories wrongly blamed beach pollution on sewage dumping "regardless of any scientific evidence to support these claims," McLellan and Jensen wrote.

Their study also found that half the stories analyzed "cast doubt on the scientific premise that beach closings are caused by local sources" such as seagull droppings washed onto Lake Michigan beaches. The articles all ran in the Journal Sentinel over the past five years.

The report was published in April on ActionBioscience.org, a Web site sponsored by the American Institute of Biological Sciences.

In an interview Thursday, McClellan said she was prompted to do the study because she had frequently heard people at community meetings blaming sewer overflow problems alone for Milwaukee's beach pollution. City beaches last year were closed more than half the swimming season.

In characterizing some stories as misleading, she said the study's intent was not to claim bias or unfairness.

"We are not questioning the validity of anyone's statements about the subject, just tallying the content," she said.

Her own scientific research suggests beach fecal coliform bacteria - used by the city Health Department to warn of unsafe swimming conditions - comes from non-human sources. That bacteria likely washed to the beaches by polluted storm water runoff, her earlier studies have found. One of her studies pinned most blame for high bacteria counts at South Shore Beach on seagull and other bird droppings.

"We have to call it like it is, even if it's unpopular," said McClellan, from the Water Institute's labs on

the Kinnickinnic River near the lakefront.

McLellan, however, said she could not exonerate sewer overflows in beach pollution.

"We do not want to say sewage does not close the beaches," she said. "It may."

But how much of that reaches the beach is at issue. There's no debate that human fecal pollution, mostly from sewage dumping, "constitutes the greatest public health threat."

Her biggest research benefactor has been the Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District, which has awarded the UWM Water Institute more than \$1.3 million in grant funding since 2001.

McLellan said MMSD did not pay for the newspaper study or influence that work. Other grants have included sums for public outreach, she said, and she and Jensen did some of the new study on their own time.

Sewerage district officials have long emphasized the role of runoff, or "non-point source," pollution as the key contributor to polluted beaches, while de-emphasizing the role of MMSD's raw sewage dumping. The district has discharged more than 14 billion gallons of untreated wastewater into local streams and Lake Michigan in the nearly 12 years since the deep tunnel system was completed.

MMSD Executive Director Kevin Shafer did not return calls Thursday.

Polluted storm water - not raw sewage dumping - "is considered the largest threat to water quality in the United States," the study states. That conclusion was based on a broad finding by the federal government rather than her own local beach research, McLellan said in the interview.

Richard Whitman, chief of the U.S. Geological Survey Great Lakes Science Center and a beach pollution expert, said both storm runoff and sewer overflows cause beach pollution. It remains difficult to separate the two sources, but much of the research shows "sewage is a big player," he said.

"There's little doubt that sewage can close beaches," Whitman said in an interview. "I know there is an argument in Milwaukee whether it's (sewage dumping) or birds or storm water or beach contamination. It's probably a little bit of all those things."

The study was criticized by Laurel O'Sullivan, Great Lakes coordinator for the Natural Resources Defense Council, an environmental advocate. McLellan's research emphasis on storm water pollution has colored her view, O'Sullivan said.

McLellan said MMSD had never pressured her to shade her findings.

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