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Bacteria hit the beach

Elevated levels blamed on 'clean' storm water runoff

Posted: Jan. 20, 2005

As if single-digit temperatures weren't enough of a deterrent to hitting Milwaukee's lakefront beaches, scientists now say polluted runoff has led to higher bacteria levels there, which could mean more closures this summer.

Weeds sprouting up along Bradford Beach are evidence of pollution carried to the beach by sewers designed to carry "clean" rainwater to the lake.

While heavy sewage dumping after big storms contributes to the pollution, storm sewers draining directly onto the beach are the cause of elevated bacteria levels after light rains, said Sandra McLellan, a water quality expert with UW-Milwaukee's Great Lakes Water Institute.

The storm sewers run from the bluffs across Lincoln Memorial Drive and end at the beach.

And because pollutants are crossing the beach, simply advising swimmers to get out of the water might not be enough.

Although officials are working on a solution, they might not have one by summer.

"It's a priority, but our resources are limited," said Greg High, an administrator with the county Department of Parks and Public Infrastructure. "We want to make sure we have the most cost-effective solution."

That won't be until 2006 at the earliest.

For decades, storm sewers have been used to keep too much rainwater from getting into sanitary sewers, but researchers have found the first flush of a storm washes all kinds of pollutants, including E. coli, into the storm sewers and onto the beach.

- From staff and Milwaukee Journal Sentinel reports

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