



Swimmers beware: Don't love that dirty water

By Katie Farrell and Will Courtney

STAFF WRITERS

August 11, 2008 11:43 pm

NEWBURYPORT — A rain-filled summer is doing more than just ruining cookouts and hurting weekend plans. It has turned the Merrimack River a murky brown.

Ralph Steele, Newburyport's harbormaster, said it looks like "hot chocolate."

But because there is no testing done of the Merrimack River that gives immediate results, the levels of E. coli or other bacteria swimming in the river on any given day are often unknown.

"Some (of the color) is simple erosion," said Tracie Sales, the water resource manager for the Merrimack River Watershed Council. "But until someone does an analysis, no one knows."

In its 2007 annual report, the MRWC declared the river's water quality to be as good as it has been in decades, with one exception: after a rainstorm. So swimming in the Merrimack right now is not such a great idea.

"Generally speaking, I wouldn't want to go swimming in the river right after a significant rainstorm," Sales said.

The state tests the water off Salisbury Reservation's beach weekly and has yet to find any problems, though there have been 155 other beach closures statewide this summer.

Salisbury does not have the storm runoff problems that others do closer to Boston, said Wendy Fox, a spokeswoman for the Division of Conservation and Recreation, which oversees state beaches. The beaches here have less population density and are wide open ocean beaches, she said, so problems with runoff or storm drainage are much fewer.

In the river, however, the MRWC collects bacteria samples only once a month, Sales said, and then sends them to the lab for testing. Results can be delayed, which makes it hard for the council to have up-to-date information, she said.

"We don't know until it's too late," she said.

Sales said the Merrimack is known to have two sources of pollution.

The "non-point" source is caused by animal waste, such as pets, birds or farm animals, Sales said.

The other is combined sewer overflow, which is caused when a treatment plant is so inundated with water from the rain, it is forced to flush out untreated or partially treated water into the river.

"Unfortunately, when it rains, like it has been lately, it's too much water for the capacity of the plant," Sales said.

Wayne Waisanen, a shift operator for the Haverhill Wastewater Treatment plant, said the plant has actually fared pretty well. Citing July data, he said the plant discharged water that didn't meet E. coli standards just once last month.

But in his mind, the river isn't ever safe to swim in.

"It's safe to boat or Jet Ski, but to me, swimming in the river is taking it one step too far," he said.

During dry weather, Waisanen said the treatment plant removes about 97 or 98 percent of the waste.

"That still leaves 2 percent of the waste, and that essentially ends up in the river," he said. "Then you end up during rain surge events, bacteria taking a trip through the system without getting killed. We try to disinfect to the best of our ability, but it's not 100 percent foolproof."

Waisanen notes that a significant percentage of the water in the Merrimack is treated water sent back into the system. When you consider the Merrimack River system starts in Laconia, N.H., and works its way through Concord and Manchester, N.H., then Lowell, Lawrence, Haverhill and on to Newburyport, then add the tributaries feeding the river, there is a lot of wastewater working its way downriver.

Sales said she'll stick by her organization's annual report.

"The river seems to be fairly clean," she said.

But without more testing, it's difficult to know just how clean it is on any given day.

"It's one of the battles we face," Sales said. "It's a whole lot better, but we're not there yet."

Copyright © 1999-2008 cnhi, inc.