Water: ‘Our first concern should be public health and safety’

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In August, Surfrider measured 518 organisms per 100 milliliters in the ocean near Gower Street, well above the 158 organisms per 100 milliliters threshold considered safe under the Oregon Beach Monitoring Program, run through the Oregon Health Authority.

High measurements of E. coli in fresh water and enterococcus in marine water are indicators of the possible presence of fecal matter and a potential health hazard.

Watershed Council Chairman Mike Manzulli said the city’s beaches have some of the highest pollution readings in Oregon.

In 2013, 12 percent of Cannon Beach’s results exceeded the national Beach Action Value safety threshold, according to the Natural Resources Defense Council. Sunset Bay State Park in Coos County was the worst, with 35 percent of its results exceeding the health threshold.

Manzulli noted two recurring themes: high readings at the Gower Street and Chisana Creek outfalls, and “city denial” of potential infrastructure problems. He said a Cannon Beach 2012 study suggested the need for infrastructure testing, but to his knowledge, the testing never happened. “The city does not know the source of all the contamination,” he said, adding Cannon Beach needs to investigate further.

Public Works Director Dan Grassick countered that the city did take steps to find solutions for the high readings. No health issues were determined, he said.

In 2013, Oregon reported 94 beaches, only 16 of which were monitored, according to the Natural Resources Defense Council.

Grassick suggested widespread testing rather than limited samplings, which would enable the city to compare its results with more locations in Oregon.

City testing ceased

Advisories are issued for marine water when bacteria counts are high because of the potential of ingesting contaminants during swimming and surfing. Symptoms include diarrhea, cramps and nausea.

An advisory was not issued on Aug. 29, however, because Surfrider is not vetted under the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality.

It is not unusual for Cannon Beach to receive at least one health advisory per year.

Cannon Beach did its own testing for nearly a decade, mirroring what the Oregon Beach Monitoring Program does in the summer.

Over the last three years, Cannon Beach wastewater staff moved farther up the basins, attempting to determine the source for high readings. Grassick said city staff used optical brighteners to look for human causes of the pollution, particularly household detergents and cleansers used in laundries and bathrooms.

“To date, we’ve found nothing,” he said Monday.

Not finding any issues with the wastewater system and spending $15,000 a year just to collect numbers, Grassick said the city decided not to put money in the budget for testing this year. “We didn’t get rid of the program, we just put it in the closet,” he said.

The program was halted this July.

This concerned Surfrider and the Ecola Watershed Council. “The city has stopped its own testing, so we’re concerned about what could be happening,” Cruse said at the council meeting.

Lack of a pattern

Grassick said Surfrider’s data fails to indicate “a trigger event.”

Manzulli said Cannon Beach’s fluctuating visitor population could be the cause of high enterococcal and E. coli numbers, stressing the sewer system during the summer season.

Grassick said he would like to see more testing along the coast before jumping to any conclusions. “The life of bacteria is flashing,” he said, adding a morning sample could produce high results, while an afternoon one doesn’t.

Cruse agreed they have yet to find any consistent patterns, though readings are typically higher after a rain event.

Test results fail to explain the random high readings during dry spells, however.

City Councilor Mike Benefield said he would like testers to focus on the reasons why. “I think it’s a problem, don’t get me wrong,” he said. “But the city did look and it doesn’t appear to be a single source.”

Future discussions

When the city conducted its own testing, staff did not find human waste issues, Grassick said. Public Works performed DNA testing twice, sending samples to laboratories at Oregon State University. The sampling was inconclusive, although it did point to nonhuman, mammal contamination.

Manzulli said he is not fully convinced. He asked for smoke or dye tests to determine if there are infrastructure issues leading to the high readings.

Cruse said Surfrider has been successful in other coastal cities. Working with Newport in Lincoln County, the city discovered sewer infrastructure problems through smoke and dye testing. This enabled the city to remediate the situation.

Jessie Jones, who works with the North Coast Surfrider Foundation, added there are loans and grants available for such work.

Grassick said Cannon Beach went through smoke testing about seven years ago. In Newport’s case, Grassick said, the historic Nye Beach sector was not connected to the sewer system, resulting in issues.

He recalled one particular case in Cannon Beach where a restroom was improperly connected at a hotel. That happened decades ago during construction, however, and was fixed.

Mayor Sam Steidel noted that there’s also been dye tests in the past. Each failed to reveal any systemic problems with the city’s infrastructure. “Our sewer system is always in need of repair,” Steidel said. “I think Dan (Grassick) is always on top of that.”

Grassick said he’d like more discussions to center on health risks and concerns. If the contaminants aren’t human in origin, what are the risks?

“Our first concern should be public health and safety,” Manzulli said.

Hannah Moore with the Oregon Beach Monitoring Program tested ocean water near Gower Street in Cannon Beach in July.
Dani Palmer/EO Media Group

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