

Getting to the source of the WATER WOES



Cannon Beach revives water testing after high bacteria readings

By Brenna Visser
Cannon Beach Gazette

After high bacteria readings at Cannon Beach outfalls, the city has revived a water testing program in search of a solution.

In late June, routine sampling conducted through the Oregon Beach Monitoring Program found readings at two freshwater outfalls exceeded the state's recreational water standard of 130 mpn, or most probable number, a testing method used to estimate the number of colony forming units of bacteria.

The Chisana Creek outfall at Tolovana State Park registered at 465 mpn, more than three times what is considered safe by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. The Ecola Court outfall pipe hit 134 mpn. Ingesting bacteria contaminated water can result in illness.

Bacteria levels appear to have steadied for now. But questions persist about why, after almost a decade, Cannon Beach continues to see higher levels of bacteria at several beach outfalls.

According to the Surfrider Foundation, which has tested outfalls around Cannon Beach for 10 years, 25 to 50 percent of readings have exceeded state standards, depending on the year. There have been four high readings registered since 2016 with the Oregon Beach Monitoring Program.

Cannon Beach is consistently one of the five beaches on the Oregon Coast that causes the organization the most concern with regard to bacteria levels, Charlie Plybon, Surfrider's Oregon Policy Manager, said.

So what is the source, and why is it difficult to identify it?

The problem

Sources of contamination to surface waters include wastewater treatment plants, septic systems, storm runoff, and domestic and wild animal manure, according to the EPA.

For almost a decade, the city ran a variety of tests to try to identify anything within the infrastructure that could be the source. The steps included weekly water sampling, using optical



BRENNA VISSER

Assistant Public Works Director Trevor Mount collects water samples at the Chisana Creek outfall at Tolovana State Park.

brighteners to look for human causes of pollution like household detergents and cleansers, and conducting smoke tests. The monitoring sought to find out whether human fecal matter was making it to the beach. The program ended in 2015 after former Public Works Director Dan Grassick deemed issues were unrelated to the wastewater system.

Historically, the city has also considered other sources, such as wildlife, as a possible culprit. Two DNA-tested samples were inconclusive, but pointed to some animal contamination. This could be waste left by seagulls on someone's roof or feces left by an elk near a stream getting filtered down through the city's water channels.

"I think it's normal activity. Dogs or elk or what have you are going to do what they are going to do," City Manager Bruce St. Denis said. "It washes into a gully where it concentrates, and then when it rains it all comes out one outfall."

While the source remains unclear, St. Denis said recent smoke testing did not indicate issues within the wastewater system.

"If the contaminants were coming from the city's wastewater system, the readings would be

elevated on a continuous basis," St. Denis said. "They are not."

But Plybon argues that given how frequent high bacteria readings have been historically, it is unlikely Cannon Beach's aging infrastructure plays no role.

Plybon cited multiple infrastructure issues listed in the city's wastewater master plan, which was adopted earlier this year and outlines projects that need to be addressed over 20 years. When it was adopted, the Ecola Creek Watershed Council requested the city prioritize repairs near the Chisana Creek and Gower Street outfalls.

Plybon said he applauds the city for doing a wastewater review, which Surfrider has asked the city to do for years. But without first addressing infrastructure issues, the city can't rule out the possibility high bacteria could be related.

"Maybe not all of these things will contribute to the issue, but in my opinion it's likely a cause," Plybon said. "Because it's been a cause in every community we've been to with these issues. These are common issues, having aging infrastructure on the coast — and it contributes to bacteria problems."



BRENNA VISSER

Assistant Public Works Director Trevor Mount pours a water sample into a vial.

St. Denis said projects listed in the master plan are long-term issues, and to his knowledge are not directly contributing to bacteria spikes.

Without a pattern

Part of the difficulty in narrowing down a source for the bacteria is the fact high readings don't appear to have a pattern, St. Denis said. Spikes are often seen after heavy rains or at the height of tourism season, but high readings have been recorded during all times of the year and in different weather.

That is why the city decided to reinstate the water testing program, only this time to schedule samples on the day before and after heavy rains to see if there is a pattern.

The city will also start testing on the east side of U.S. Highway 101 — farther than previous tests have gone — to see if any bacteria is originating from wildlife in the hills. There are also plans to do more extensive DNA testing, St. Denis said, but the city is searching for a lab to analyze samples since Oregon State University no longer offers the service.

"We're just looking for clues," he said.

City Council considers changes to short-term rental rules

Rental process confusion prompts review

By Brenna Visser
Cannon Beach Gazette

Cannon Beach wants to cut the confusion over short-term rentals by reviewing the permit structure.

In a work session Tuesday, July 10, city councilors began re-evaluating the town's short-term rental ordinance, which regulates where vacation rentals can operate, how often houses can be rented, off-street parking and safety inspections.

Substantive changes proposed include possibly adjusting the 14-day rule, which limits property owners to one renter in a single 14-day period, and ending, through attrition, a lottery system that allows some vacation homeowners the chance at a five-year, unlimited rental permit.

The council is following up on a promise made last year to take a deeper dive into short-term regulations in pursuit of making a clearer ordinance.

Most issues lie in vacation rental owners not fully understanding the 14-day rule, City



BRENNA VISSER/CANNON BEACH GAZETTE

Vacation rental owners and management companies may need to make changes.

Planner Mark Barnes said. Many have issues tracking exactly when a period stops and starts, leading to more violations.

Instead, Barnes suggested changing it to allow a homeowner to rent to two parties anytime within the month. This would simplify enforcement for rental owners who are not professionally managed — the group of people who tend to see more violations, Barnes said.

Half of all short-term rentals fall in the 14-day permit category.

"I think it would generate fewer violations," Barnes said.

"Sure, some are willfully not understanding the rules, but I think it's mostly confusion."

The vacation rental management industry has claimed the current rule prohibits them from effectively renting their properties in the off-season when business is most needed.

Often one family will want to rent a house around Christmas and another will want to rent around New Year's Eve, but because the two holidays fall within the same 14 days, the home can only be rented once.

This change would alleviate this issue.

"In the winter, we're hap-



'WHEN IT'S UNLIMITED, YOU'RE BASICALLY RUNNING A MOTEL IN A RESIDENTIAL NEIGHBORHOOD. IT VIOLATES THE CHARACTER OF THE COMMUNITY.'

City Councilor Mike Benefield

py to get any business," Linda Beck-Sweeney, owner of Cannon Beach Vacation Rentals, said at the meeting. "It affects the shoulder months."

There is the possibility the change could lead to more occupancy in a vacation home, depending on whether a renter checked in at the beginning or the end of the month. A re-education effort would need to take place, Barnes said, and companies would have to change their management software to the current rules.

Overall, the City Council saw the change as mostly positive.

"I'd rather have a system that's easier to understand," City Councilor Mike Benefield said.

Unlimited permits

Councilors also discussed slowly eliminating the lottery

for five-year unlimited permits. Vacation homeowners are randomly chosen out of a pool of applicants whenever one of the permits expires. These permits are capped at 92, but only 35 are active now.

Both Benefield and City Councilor Nancy McCarthy questioned whether this kind of unlimited permit was fair or needed.

Both argued being able to rent a home every night can lead to more livability issues, such as increased off-street parking and noise complaints. McCarthy added those with five-year permits could still apply for a 14-day permit,

which has no cap.

"When it's unlimited, you're basically running a motel in a residential neighborhood," Benefield said. "It violates the character of the community."

City Councilor George Vetter disagreed, arguing that taking any permits out of the short-term rental system will just drive rentals underground.

"I see these 92 rentals as a release valve for the community," Vetter said. "The demand is too great. They'll do it anyway, permit or not."

The council plans to discuss the ordinance again in September.

the Local Grill & Scoop

Experience Family Dining in a Relaxed & Friendly Environment

Serving Seafood, Pizza, Sandwiches, Espressos, Beer, Wine, Ice Cream and our Homemade Desserts

Breakfast
Lunch
Dinner

"TO-GO" Orders Welcome

156 N. Hemlock • Cannon Beach
503.436.9551

Owned and Operated by the Cleary Family

powered by

THE BRIDGE

music first

SERVING LUNCH & DINNER

OPEN AT 11:30
Tuesday's Open at 4pm

Delightful Beer
Garden • Ocean View Deck
Pool Tables • Darts
Full Bar (including Bill's Tavern brews)
but that's not all...

Smoked Pork Ribs • Steak • Seafood
and much, much more!

Located in SOUTH Cannon Beach
3301 S. Hemlock St. • Tolovana Park
503.436.1130 • Minors Welcome