

# North Coast water quality testing group gets a boost

## Blue Water Task Force in need of more volunteers to monitor, protect coastal recreation sites

By Katherine Lacaze  
Seaside Signal

The Surfrider Foundation wants the public to be aware of the water quality at coastal sites used for recreation. That's the primary mission of the national environmental nonprofit organization's Blue Water Task Force program, designed to monitor beaches and alert citizens and community officials about water-quality problems and help them work toward solutions when needed.

At several locations across the nation and state, such as Newport, robust volunteer-run Blue Water Task Forces have created large, long-term data sets from consistently testing water at the popular beaches in their communities. At sites along the North Oregon Coast, however, testing during the past few years has been "pretty slim," said Jesse Jones, North Coast Blue Water Task

Force coordinator. Most recently, the group only had tested the North Coast sites — the Cove in Seaside, Indian Beach in Ecola State Park, two locations near Gower Street in downtown Cannon Beach and two locations at Short Sands in Oswald West State Park — a handful of times in 2011 and 2013.

Part of the challenge has been Surfrider's struggle to get a strong contingent of volunteers for the North Coast task force, and volunteers are crucial since the closest Surfrider chapter is in Portland. Several chapter members will come to the coast to collect and process samples when they can, and the chapter offers support through raising funds and awareness, but it still adds up to a weaker program than having local volunteers available to carry most of the weight of testing and reporting in their respective areas. Hoping to change that, Surfrider put part of an Oregon Community Foundation grant it received in November 2014 toward hiring Jones as a temporary coordinator to the help make the North Coast Blue Water Task Force stronger.

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Jesse Jones,  
North Coast Blue Water Task Force coordinator

Jones' job as coordinator, she said, is to develop a sustainable plan for the program and set it in motion by acquiring volunteers, making a schedule and figuring out other logistics. The immediate goal is to collect a sample at each site, test the water and report findings at least monthly. Once more people become interested and involved, Jones said, they can try for twice per month.

"Once a week would be ideal, especially through summer," she said. "We're trying to have as robust of a program as other places on the coast and the rest of the nation."

She hopes to get people passionate to become team leaders who will maintain the program when her job as coordinator sunsets after summer. Jones already has volunteers on board and they've been testing regularly since May.

Having a long-term data set is important, because it can help a community and officials differentiate between a spike caused by an isolated incident that alone is not indicative of an issue needing to be addressed versus consecutive high readings that point toward a systemic problem, said Ryan Cruse, Surfrider Foundation's Oregon field coordinator.

While the Oregon Beach Monitoring Program, run by the Department of Environmental Quality and Oregon Health Authority, tests coastal waters for the presence of fecal bacteria and reports elevated levels to the public through the Environmental Protection Agency, the testing only occurs between Memorial Day in May and Labor Day in September. Additionally, the health authority's website states, "limited resources

make it difficult to get to all beach locations in any given year or to monitor for an entire 12 months."

The Blue Water Task Force groups are meant to test year-round and quickly process data to keep the public up to date on the water quality of their local beaches on a weekly or bi-monthly basis. They also can test at more sites. When gathering samples, the Blue Water Task Force also measures water temperature to have a long-term data set on that element. Additionally, volunteers will record time of day, weather conditions, wind direction, wave height and other factors when collecting samples so, over time, it can help the group determine what, if any, effect those factors are having on water quality and temperature. When one is doing any kind of monitoring, "getting all the environmental factors is a good thing to do," Jones said.

Surfrider's second focus is to assist state, city or community officials as they work proactively to find solutions when a potential problem is detected. For instance, the group was testing at Short Sands beach in Oswald West State Park and, in August 2013, water quality issues were identified through readings detecting a high rate of bacteria. The issues were linked to a septic system that was failing because of a level of use it wasn't built to accommodate. In that case, Jones said, Surfrider's bacteria testing and proactive communication with the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department initiated the construction

of a new drain field, a project completed earlier this year.

On the national Blue Water Task Force website, where results are posted as soon as they're processed, a green dot indicates low bacteria, or 0 to 35 MPN (most probable number) per milliliter; a yellow dot indicates medium bacteria, or 36 to 104 MPN per milliliter; and a red dot indicates high bacteria, or more than 104 MPN per milliliter. MPN is a mathematical method that can be shown statistically to have the highest probability of estimating the organism density in tubes or trays where sample water has been distributed evenly. A blue dot denotes when other bacteria is measured.

The samples are processed in Surfrider's incubator at a small lab housed in a maintenance facility in Nehalem Bay State Park. The cost per sample in terms of materials used is about \$10 to \$11, which is covered by the Portland chapter of Surfrider Foundation. The organization believes the cost of sampling is worth it to monitor and protect Oregon's beaches, Cruse said. No experience is necessary to join the task force, as training is provided. The most recent session was held June 16.

The next training will be Saturday, June 27. Volunteers will begin at 10 a.m. with a sample collection at Gower Street Beach in Cannon Beach. Sample preparation and reading will take place at 11:30 a.m. at the Nehalem Bay State Park in Manzanita. Trainees can come for one or both parts. Contact Jones at jesse.vernonia@gmail.com or 503-989-7244.

## SEASIDE Signal

### Seaside Signal

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