



## **DROUGHT BOOSTS L.A. BEACH WATER QUALITY**

*92% of sites get A or B grade in Heal the Bay's annual report; O.C., Ventura shine*

SANTA MONICA, Calif. (Thursday, May 26, 2016) – As Southern California wrestles with historic drought, there may be one silver lining in the lack of rain clouds: steadily improving beach water quality.

With a fifth consecutive year of below-average rainfall in Southern California in 2015-16, local beaches experienced less polluted runoff, which is funneled untreated into our seas via the vast stormdrain system.

As a result, water quality remained in the excellent to very good range at the vast majority of beaches in Los Angeles, Orange, and Ventura counties last year, according to Heal the Bay's 26<sup>th</sup> annual Beach Report Card, which the environmental group released today.

In L.A. County, Heal the Bay analysts assigned A-to-F letter grades to 88 beaches for three reporting periods in the 2015-16 report, based on levels of weekly bacterial pollution measured by county health agencies. Some 92% of beaches received A or B grades for the high-traffic summer period (April-October 2015), essentially flat with last year's results. That figure also marks a 6% uptick from the county's summer average for the previous five years.

While the news is encouraging, Los Angeles County still leads the state in the number of beaches with poor water quality. Overall, nearly one in nine L.A. County monitored beaches received grades of C or lower during the busy summer season.

"A day at the beach shouldn't make anyone sick," said Leslie Griffin, Heal the Bay's chief water quality scientist and co-author of the report with James Alamillo. "The reassuring news is that if you swim at an open-ocean beach in the summer away from storm drains, creek mouths, and piers you stand very little risk of getting ill."

Swimming at a beach with a water quality grade of C or lower greatly increases the risk of contracting illnesses such as stomach flu, ear infections, upper respiratory infections, and rashes.

A UCLA study concluded that the regional public health cost of gastrointestinal illnesses caused by recreating in polluted ocean waters totals at least \$21 million annually in Los Angeles and Orange counties.

The news is worse during wet weather, when nearly 40% of beaches received an F grade. That development is troubling for the region's sizeable number of year-round surfers, paddleboarders, divers and other ocean-users.

The county is home to three of the 10 locales listed on Heal the Bay's annual Beach Bummer List, which ranks the most polluted beaches in the state, based on levels of fecal bacteria and other harmful bacteria.

The beach at Santa Monica Pier, which has grappled with poor water quality for years despite numerous remediation projects, remains on the Bummer List this year, coming in at No. 5. With a new Expo line extension dropping beachgoers off near this popular beach, a new wet-weather stormdrain diversion project will hopefully improve water quality.

Mother's Beach in Marina del Rey, an enclosed site with poor circulation, rounded out the L.A. Bummers, ranking as the sixth most polluted beach in the state.

The beach 100 yards south of the Redondo Beach Municipal Pier grabbed the No. 7 slot, potentially impacted by wastewater diversions from the Hyperion Treatment plant last summer.

Orange County didn't escape the Bummer List, with Dana Point's Monarch Beach entering the list for the first time in the No. 4 slot. The beach sits in front of a luxury five-star hotel – The Ritz-Carlton – and near one of the O.C.'s best surf spots. While the runoff that enters via Salt Creek is treated at an on-site ozone treatment facility, bacterial issues persist at this site. In order to use this beach safely it is recommended to swim at least 100 yard away from Salt Creek.

Another factor to consider at Monarch Beach is Orange County's water-quality sampling location was moved to point zero – where a creek or storm drain meets the water. This sampling switch may have played a role in poorer wet-weather grades. Los Angeles County has long tested at so-called point zero locations to more accurately measure water quality.

Aside from Monarch Beach, Orange County beaches scored very good grades, well above state average. Some 94% of 114 beaches monitored in the summer received A grades, a 3% gain from its five-year summer average.

Ventura County once again enjoyed some of the best water quality in the state, earning perfect A grades at all of its 40 monitored beaches in the summer reporting period for a third straight year.

Also on the positive side, five beaches in Los Angeles County earned spots on Heal the Bay's Honor Roll, which recognizes beaches monitored year-round that score perfect A+ grades for the report's three time periods. Orange County earned 12 spots on the Honor Roll, while Ventura achieved three. A full list of Honor Roll beaches statewide can be found in the report.

Statewide, California's overall water quality during summer was excellent, with 95% of the 456 beaches monitored getting A or B grades. That figure is essentially on par with last year's results. Some 22 locations received grades of C or below during the summer months.

**For a detailed look at beach results for each county and report methodology, please refer to our complete report. A PDF version is available at [www.healthebay.org](http://www.healthebay.org)**

To protect beachgoers from illness, Heal the Bay urges ocean-lovers to avoid enclosed beaches, swim **at least** 100 yards away from flowing storm drains and piers, and wait **at least** three days after rainfall before entering the ocean. Water quality grades for nearly 600 beaches are updated each week at [beachreportcard.org](http://beachreportcard.org).

### **How we can stem tide of bacterial pollution**

While low rainfall totals have contributed to significantly improved water quality statewide, it should be noted that California often swings from extended dry periods to shorter periods of intense, wet weather.

An average storm in Los Angeles County dumps more than 100 billion gallons of polluted stormwater into the ocean – roughly 20 Rose Bowls' worth. Even on a dry day, some 10 million gallons of polluted runoff flows into Santa Monica Bay.

In response, Heal the Bay's policy staff is advocating for public funding measures to build nature-based projects that capture, cleanse, and reuse runoff rather than dumping it uselessly into the sea. Progressive city planning, smart public infrastructure, and so-called Low Impact Development in the private sector would turn a nuisance into a resource.

### **Heal the Bay to forecast water quality**

This summer Heal the Bay, Stanford University, and UCLA will expand their pilot program to test the effectiveness of new predictive beach water quality tools. Using sophisticated statistical models, environmental data, and past bacteria samples, the scientific teams are aiming to accurately predict when beaches should be posted with warning or open signs.

Promising early results last year at three pilot beaches (Arroyo Burro Beach, Santa Monica Pier Beach, and Doheny Beach) indicated that agencies may be able to post a warning notice immediately at pollution-impacted beaches rather than waiting one to two days for bacteria testing. These new models will protect public health by providing more timely and advanced water quality information to public health officials. This summer, Heal the Bay will add two more beaches to the predictive modeling program – East Beach in Santa Barbara and Belmont Pier in Long Beach.

### **About the Beach Report Card**

All county health departments in California are required to test beach water quality samples for three types of indicator bacteria at least once a week during the summer season. Many counties also monitor heavily used beaches year-round. Heal the Bay compiles the complex shoreline data, analyzes it, and assigns an easy-to-understand letter grade.

The summary includes an analysis of water quality for three time periods: summer dry season (April through October 2015), winter dry weather (November 2015 through March 2016), and year-round wet weather conditions. The grading methodology is endorsed by the State Water Resources Control Board.

A FAQ section, methodology, weekly grade updates, as well as historical grades can be found at [www.beachreportcard.org](http://www.beachreportcard.org).

Heal the Bay's Beach Report Card is made possible through the generous support of SIMA and the Swain Barber Foundation

### **About Heal the Bay**

Now in its 31<sup>st</sup> year, Heal the Bay is dedicated to making Santa Monica Bay and Southern California watersheds and coastal waters safe and healthy for people and marine life. It is one of the largest nonprofit environmental organizations in Los Angeles County, with more than 15,000 members.

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