RAINS DAMPEN BEACH WATER-QUALITY GRADES

Drought eases, but bacterial pollution clouds Heal the Bay’s 2016-17 beach survey

SAN FRANCISCO, Calif. (Thursday, June 15, 2017) – Much-needed winter storms may have relieved California’s historic drought, but all that rain came at some cost – poor beach water quality.

Bacterial pollution at some of Northern California’s most popular beaches spiked dramatically in 2016-17, according to Heal the Bay’s 27th annual Beach Report Card, which the Santa Monica-based nonprofit released today.

Record rainfall created billions of gallons of polluted runoff, which poured into storm drains and out to the ocean. Nearly half of the 100 Northern California beaches monitored year-round last year earned C to F grades from Heal the Bay during wet weather. That’s in marked contrast to the summer reporting period (April to October 2016), when only 11 beaches earned poor grades.

Polluted ocean waters pose a significant health risk to the tens of thousands of year-round ocean users in California, who can contract a respiratory or gastrointestinal illness from one morning swim or surf session in polluted waters.

Heal the Bay analysts assigned A-to-F letter grades to 100 Northern California beaches for three reporting periods in the 2016-17 report, based on levels of weekly bacterial pollution measured by county health agencies. Northern California beaches include those in Santa Cruz, San Mateo, Alameda, San Francisco, Contra Costa, Marin, Sonoma, Mendocino, Humboldt and Del Norte counties.

Wet weather aside, the news for summer beachgoers remains positive. Some 85% of Northern California beaches received A grades for the high-traffic summer period (April-October 2016).

In the Bay Area, San Francisco County beaches scored remarkable grades during summer dry weather, with 100% of the 15 monitored beaches earning A or B grades. That’s a 13% increase from the county’s five-year average. San Mateo County’s 21 monitored beaches followed suit, with 90% earning A or B marks in the summer.

On a more negative note, East Bay beach grades took a dip this year. Only 75% of 8 monitored sites received an A or B grade in the summer. And three out of four beaches in Contra Costa and Alameda counties received C-to-F grades in the winter, more than double that of the county’s five-year average.

Beaches in Santa Cruz performed well in summer dry weather, with 85% of its 13 monitored beaches receiving A or B grades. However, the county has some of the worst wet weather grades in the state, with 54% of sites receiving C to F grades. Those grades should worry the county’s sizable surf population, who routinely enter the water year-round.
Further north, the 37 monitored beaches in Marin, Sonoma, Mendocino and Del Norte counties all earned perfect A grades for summer dry weather. Humboldt struggled with mixed grades, with three beaches earning A summer grades, but two spots earning D and F grades.

Despite the encouraging news overall in dry weather, stubborn pockets of chronic pollution still plague several popular shorelines. NorCal beaches accounted for five sites listed on Heal the Bay’s infamous Beach Bummer List, which ranks the 10 most polluted beaches in the state:

#1 - Clam Beach County Park (Humboldt) – Private septic systems upcreek may be to blame.
#3 - Cowell Beach (Santa Cruz) – “Improves” to #3 this year; steel bird fencing may have helped.
#4 - Marina Lagoon (San Mateo) – Poor water circulation in enclosed beach hurts water quality.
#7 - Capitola Beach (Santa Cruz) – Returns to list after 3-year absence; sits at river creek mouth.
#8 - Luffenholtz Beach (Humboldt) – Private septic systems in Trinidad are culprits.

“We want people catching waves, not bugs, when they head to the beach,” said Sarah Sikich, Heal the Bay’s vice president and longtime ocean policy advocate. “The reassuring news is that if you swim at an open-ocean beach in the summer, away from storm drains and creek mouths, you statistically have 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.

Statewide, California’s overall water quality during summer was excellent, with 96% of the 416 beaches monitored getting A or B grades. That figure marks a slight rise from last year’s results. Some 16 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/beachreportcard.

How to stay safe at the beach

- Check www.beachreportcard.org for latest water quality grades.
- Avoid enclosed beaches.
- Swim at least 100 yards away from flowing storm drains and piers.
- Wait at least three days after rainfall before entering the ocean.

How to stem the tide of bacterial pollution
California often swings from extended dry periods to shorter periods of intense, wet weather. When rains do come, our state needs to do a better job of capturing runoff before it hits shorelines. Heal the Bay advocates for reusing that water directly for non-potable purposes, such as landscaping, or sinking that water back into our aquifers rather than letting it flow uselessly to the sea.

If Southern California and San Francisco Bay Area municipalities installed infrastructure to capture and reuse stormwater, the state could augment water supplies by as much as 630,000 acre-feet each year, according to a 2014 NRDC study. That’s roughly equal to the amount of water used by the entire City of Los Angeles annually.
Trump’s proposed EPA cuts to slash beach monitoring

Many counties in California rely solely on federal funds from the EPA to conduct regular beach water quality monitoring. With the new federal administration proposing a 31% reduction in EPA funding, monies allocated to support local beach water-quality monitoring have been completely zeroed out. States are only required to implement monitoring programs when federal funding is provided. If Congress does not restore funding for monitoring back into the final budget this fall, beachgoers will remain uninformed about potential pollution and will face unknown health risks.

Heal the Bay to forecast water quality

This summer Heal the Bay, Stanford University and UCLA are expanding their predictive beach water-quality forecasting program. Using sophisticated statistical models, environmental data and past bacteria samples, the scientific team can accurately predict each morning when beaches should be posted with warning or open signs.

Promising results from the past two summers (at Arroyo Burro Beach, Santa Monica Pier Beach and Doheny Beach) demonstrated that agencies can post a warning notice immediately at pollution-impacted beaches based on predictions rather than waiting days for test results. These new models will protect public health by providing more advanced water quality information to public health officials. This summer, Heal the Bay will run models for 10 beaches, from San Diego to Santa Cruz counties.

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 2016), winter dry weather (November 2016 through March 2017) 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. Heal the Bay’s Beach Report Card is made possible through the generous support of SIMA and the Swain Barber Foundation.

Contacts:  
James Alamillo, Heal the Bay, (310) 936-5489, jalamillo@healthebay.org  
Matthew King, Heal the Bay, (310) 463-6266, mking@healthebay.org  
Sarah Sikich, Heal the Bay, (310) 849-7006, ssikich@healthebay.org  
Talia Roselli, Heal the Bay, (310) 944-5615, trorelli@healthebay.org