RAINS DAMPEN BEACH WATER-QUALITY GRADES

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

SANTA MONICA, 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 California’s most popular beaches spiked dramatically in 2016-17, according to Heal the Bay’s 27th annual Beach Report Card, which the nonprofit released today.

Heavy rainfall last winter created billions of gallons of polluted runoff, which poured into storm drains and out to the ocean. Nearly half of the 85 beaches that L.A. County monitored year-round last year earned F grades from Heal the Bay during wet weather. That’s in marked contrast to the summer reporting period (April to October 2016), when no beaches received failing marks.

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

In L.A. County, Heal the Bay analysts assigned A-to-F letter grades to 85 beaches for three reporting periods in the 2016-17 report, based on levels of weekly bacterial pollution measured by county health agencies. Some 93% of beaches received A grades for the high-traffic summer period (April-October 2016), a 4% uptick from last year’s report.

The news for summer beachgoers is equally encouraging in Ventura and Orange counties. Some 95% of Orange County’s 117 monitored beaches notched A grades in summer dry weather in this year’s report, while Ventura’s 40 monitored beaches scored a perfect 100% for the seventh consecutive year.

San Diego County also scored top marks, with 97% of 75 monitored sites receiving A or B grades. Wet-weather grades took a hit, with only 68% of sites earning A or B grades during rains. Also, contaminated runoff from the Tijuana River at the Mexico border resulted in 21 separate closure events.

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

#2- San Clemente Pier Recent shark sightings have closed stretches of this beach recently. But swimmers might be more worried about bacteria levels.

#5- La Jolla Cove A new addition to the Bummer List, this San Diego beach sits in an enclosed area with limited water circulation. It’s also home to growing seal and sea lion populations.
#6 - Santa Monica Pier Moist conditions, flocks of birds and stormdrain runoff are likely culprits. Construction starts soon on a 1.6-million gallon stormwater storage tank that should help.

#9 - Mother’s Beach/Marina Del Rey Don’t let the name fool you. Lack of circulation means unsafe levels of bacteria. The County has installed a circulation device and bird deterrents.

#10 - Monarch State Beach This stretch of sand north of Salt Creek sits adjacent to the five-star Ritz Carlton resort in Dana Point. But one-star water quality persists in the bird-ridden spot.

“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.

On the positive side four beaches in Los Angeles County placed 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 14 spots on the Honor Roll, while Ventura notched one. 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 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 we can stem the tide of bacterial pollution

California often swings from extended dry periods to shorter periods of intense, wet weather. Our region 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 or sinking that water back into our aquifers rather than letting it flow uselessly to the sea.

If Southern California cities had the infrastructure in place, then they could have captured and reused a bulk of the 100 billion gallons of stormwater that drenched our region last winter. That’s enough water to meet the needs of 2.5 million people each year – about a quarter of L.A. County’s population.
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. The Our WaterLA coalition is working with the L.A. County Board of Supervisors to place a funding measure on the ballot for innovative multi-benefit projects that will capture runoff and create public green spaces countywide. Look for the measure on the county ballot next year.

**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.

**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.

**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](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.

**Contacts:**
Matthew King, Heal the Bay, (310) 463-6266, mking@healthebay.org
Sarah Sikich, Heal the Bay, (310) 849-7006, ssikich@healthebay.org

###