

River Report Card Grades Freshwater Health Risks in Los Angeles County

Environmental group Heal the Bay ranks local freshwater recreation zones and popular swimming holes based on levels of harmful bacterial pollution

SANTA MONICA, Calif. (Tuesday, July 14, 2020) - Heal the Bay today released the [annual River Report Card](#), which assigns water quality color-grades of Red, Yellow, or Green for 28 freshwater sites in Los Angeles County based on observed bacteria levels in 2019. Green means there is a low risk of illness when there is contact with the water. Yellow indicates a moderate risk, while Red signals a high risk. The River Report Card is the most comprehensive water quality report to date on bacterial pollution in freshwater recreation areas within the Los Angeles River, the Malibu Creek, and the San Gabriel River Watersheds.

Due to the coronavirus pandemic and Safer At Home measures, more Angelenos will likely be heading to the local mountains and waterways this summer for recreation and escape from the urban heat. Popular freshwater areas are used for swimming, wading, fishing, kayaking, and other outdoor activities, especially when beaches and municipal cooling centers are closed. Some freshwater locations remain closed to certain activities due to coronavirus restrictions while some locations are not being monitored for water quality.

Our tests do not detect the presence of the COVID-19 virus in the water, but they do detect fecal indicator bacteria (FIB). The COVID-19 virus has been detected in sewage, indicating that fecal matter from infected individuals can contain the virus. We do not know how long the virus survives in sewage or in water, and we do not know if someone can contract the COVID-19 disease from coming into contact with water. Experts have stated that the transmission risk in water is likely very low because the virus mainly spreads through person-to-person contact. Since COVID-19 and FIB both enter our waterways through sewage, measuring FIB concentrations can help keep people safe from both.

In addition to the annual River Report Card, Heal the Bay has an [interactive map with bacterial water quality at 28 locations updated weekly](#), where Angelenos can check the latest reading before choosing a spot to swim.

Here are the major findings from Heal the Bay's 2019 data:

- Across all 28 River Report Card sites in 2019, 66% of grades assigned were Green, meaning bacterial levels were not a cause for health concern at the time the water was tested. This is a nine percent increase in Green grades from 2018.
- All four watershed study areas included in the report had a decrease in overall Red grades in 2019.
- Seven sites in the San Gabriel River Watershed and three from the Upper L.A. River Watershed made the "Top 10 Honor Roll" of freshwater sites with lowest public health risk detected, including seven that earned perfect scores of 100% Green grades.
- The River Report Card also includes a "Freshwater Fails" list, which only has six entries this year, all in the Los Angeles River Watershed. This is a reduction from ten entries in the 2018 report, a good sign that only six met the criteria of 10% or more Red grades.

- Hansen Dam at Tujunga Wash was once again the number one Fail, but improved to 44% Red grades, down from 80% in 2018. Lake Balboa Boat Ramp and Rattlesnake Park were a close second and third worst, with 43% and 41% Red grades, respectively.
- There is still room for improvement in L.A. County's freshwater quality. Nine sites we grade actually had poorer water quality in 2019 compared to 2018, including both test sites in the Malibu Creek Watershed.
- Freshwater sites in more natural areas tended to earn better grades than freshwater sites near urban development.
- *Better State and regional oversight and funding are needed for monitoring and public notice of water quality in freshwater recreation sites. Monitoring protocols and public notification in L.A. County are not standardized, and government agencies only test for E. coli. Testing should also include the fecal indicator bacteria Enterococcus. Solely monitoring for E. coli may be putting the public at unnecessary risk.*

The annual River Report Card 2019 is available at: healthebay.org/riverreportcard

Tips for enjoying and staying safe in L.A.'s rivers, streams, and creeks

Before heading to a freshwater recreation area in the Los Angeles region check out Heal the Bay's weekly updated River Report Card interactive map at healthebay.org/riverreportcard. If water quality is poor (Yellow or Red), consider choosing a different site that has good water quality.

People can also minimize risk by limiting water contact, avoiding submerging their heads underwater, avoiding hand-to-face water contact, and washing off after water contact, using soap and clean water. For all water recreation, users should avoid entering the water with an open wound, if immunocompromised, or at least 3 days after a rainfall.

About the River Report Card

Nonprofit group Heal the Bay believes people have a right to know about the conditions of local waterbodies, and to make informed decisions about how they want to experience them. Heal the Bay began monitoring freshwater recreation sites in 2014 and developed the River Report Card program in 2017 to provide easy-to-understand water quality information to the public.

Water quality grades are based on the levels of fecal indicator bacteria (*E. coli* and/or *Enterococcus*) and are displayed as Red, Yellow, or Green. Green means there is a low risk of illness when there is contact with the water. Yellow indicates a moderate risk, while Red signals a high risk.

Since Heal the Bay started monitoring freshwater recreation sites and making water quality data public, some positive changes have included increased bacterial monitoring and notifying the public in L.A. River recreation zones as well as public outreach through emails, websites, and other online means by government agencies collecting water quality information. The 2019 River Report Card includes additional recommendations for water quality monitoring and public notification protocols to protect public health.

Heal the Bay also manages the Beach Report Card and NowCast, available at beachreportcard.org, which provides A-to-F letter-grades for water quality at hundreds of beaches on the West Coast.

About Heal the Bay

Heal the Bay is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization dedicated to making the coastal waters and watersheds of Greater Los Angeles safe, healthy and clean. We use science, education, community action and advocacy to pursue our mission. Learn more about Heal the Bay at healthebay.org

Contact

Dylan Gasperik, Heal the Bay, 323-804-2768, dgasperik@healthebay.org