



DROUGHT BOOSTS L.A. BEACH WATER-QUALITY

Local grades improve in annual Heal the Bay report; O.C., Ventura shine

SANTA MONICA, Calif. (Thursday, May 22, 2014) – Severe drought may be wreaking havoc across California, but there’s a silver lining in the lack of rain clouds – improved water quality at local beaches.

With record low rainfall reducing the amount of polluted runoff funneled into our seas, water quality improved dramatically at Los Angeles County beaches last year, according to Heal the Bay’s 24th annual Beach Report Card, which the environmental group released today.

Heal the Bay analysts assigned A-to-F letter grades to 92 beaches in the county for three reporting periods in the 2013-2014 report, based on levels of weekly bacterial pollution. Some 90% of beaches received A or B grades for the high-traffic summer period (April-October 2013), a 6% improvement from last year’s grades. That figure also marks a 9% 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, one in 10 L.A. County beaches received grades of C or lower during the busy summer season. The news is worse during wet weather, when half of the beaches received grades of C or lower.

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. Mothers Beach in Marina del Rey and Cabrillo Beach harborside in San Pedro, both enclosed sites with poor circulation, came in at No. 3 and 4 on the Bummer List, respectively. The beach at Santa Monica Pier, which has grappled with poor water quality for years despite numerous remediation projects, re-entered the list at No. 7. (For ranking of other Beach Bummer sites statewide, please consult the complete report.)

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.

Each year, an estimated 75 million people visit L.A. and Orange County beaches, both residents and tourists alike. Contact with polluted water causes more than 600,000 cases of excess gastrointestinal illness each year in Los Angeles and Orange counties, according to a 2005 analysis conducted by researchers at UCLA and Stanford. This corresponds to an annual economic loss of at least \$21 million in health care costs and lost productivity.

To protect beachgoers from illness, Heal the Bay urges ocean lovers to check updated water quality grades for nearly 600 beaches each week at beachreportcard.org. Before heading to the shoreline, visitors can also access the latest grades on the go by downloading Heal the Bay’s free apps for mobile devices.

Looking regionally, Orange County notched excellent summer grades, well above state average. Some 96% of 102 beaches monitored received A grades, a 14% gain from the previous summer reporting period. The only black eye is a C grade at Baby Beach in Dana Point. Ventura County once again enjoyed some of the best water quality in the state, earning perfect A grades at all of its 39 monitored beaches in the summer reporting period.

Urban runoff remains the leading source of bacterial pollution at local shorelines. After a typical rainstorm, storm drains funnel as much as 10 billion gallons of polluted runoff directly into Santa Monica Bay, without benefit of any treatment. Given the county's sizeable population of surfers and other year-round ocean users, poor water quality during the rainy season poses significant health risks.

(With drought threatening local water supplies, Heal the Bay's policy staff is advocating for a public funding measure to build infrastructure projects that capture, cleanse and reuse stormwater 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.)

"We've seen marked improvements in California's beach water quality this year due to the historically dry conditions. However the rains will return, and when they do, we need to capture this valuable resource to maximize our local water supplies and keep polluted water out of our ocean," said Kirsten James, Science and Policy Director for Water Quality at Heal the Bay.

On the positive side, several chronically polluted beaches in Southern California showed marked improvement since the last report.

Avalon Beach, frequently listed by Heal the Bay as the most polluted beach in the state, fell off this year's Beach Bummer List. The city has undertaken numerous education and infrastructure programs since 2011 to abate pollution, including spending nearly \$6 million on sewer main improvements.

Orange County's Poche Beach, which has historically struggled with very poor water quality, also fell off this year's Bummer List and earned A and B grades throughout the year. The area's large bird population contributed to ocean pollution, and the innovative deployment of falcons and decoy coyotes to deter roosting has paid water quality dividends.

In all, eight 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. A dozen beaches in Orange County earned spots on the Honor Roll in this year's report. A full list of Honor Roll beaches statewide can be found in the report.

While low rainfall totals have led 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 El Nino is predicted for later this year, so renewed flows could exacerbate underlying water quality issues at local beaches. In response, Heal the Bay urges state lawmakers to amend Prop. 218, to allow for easier approval of stormwater project funding. Among the other recommendations in Heal the Bay's 10-point recommendation plan for improving beach water quality: mandated year-round bacteria testing at popular beaches and restored federal funding for water-quality monitoring programs.

"Heal the Bay is a valued partner in the County's effort to create greater public awareness of the negative impacts of stormwater pollution," L.A. County Public Works Director Gail Farber said. "Stormwater is an essential part of the County's strategy for a sustainable water supply, and protecting this local source of water from pollution is a regional priority."

"Funding at the level necessary to build and maintain the stormwater capture and green infrastructure projects planned for the region remains a major challenge," Farber added, noting that L.A. County will continue working with Heal the Bay and other partners to pursue the increased funding to make more of these projects a reality.

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.beachreportcard.org.

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 2013), winter dry weather (November 2013 through March 2014) 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.

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