



Swim at Your Own Risk

Bacteria Pollution in Texas Beaches and Waterways Threatens Public Health

An analysis of water testing data from the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality reveals that Texas beaches, rivers and lakes frequently have bacteria levels indicating levels of fecal contamination that are unsafe for swimming.

Beaches and Freshwater at Risk

From South Padre Island to Galveston Bay, and from the San Marcos River to Lake Lewisville, our rivers, lakes and beaches draw thousands of Texans every time the sun is out. However, an analysis of 2017 water testing data reveals that Texas waterways frequently have bacteria levels indicating fecal contamination unsafe for swimming under state law. Swimming in contaminated water can lead to gastrointestinal illness, respiratory disease, ear and eye infections, and skin rashes.

Hundreds of Sites Tested as Unsafe for Swimming in 2017

In 2017, many beaches and waterways had bacteria levels indicating unsafe pollution:

- More than half of all Texas beaches that were tested for bacterial contamination were unsafe for swimming on at least one day. Among 120 beaches in the state, 75 were unsafe for swimming on at least one day that water was sampled.
- More than 700 freshwater sites had bacteria levels that would have made them unsafe for swimming. Out of 1,450 freshwater testing sites, 708 would have been unsafe for swimming on at least one day that water was sampled.

A total of 12 Texas beaches tested as unsafe for swimming on at least five days during 2017. The three beaches with the most unsafe days were along Corpus Christi Bay.



In Corpus Christi Bay, Beaches with the Most Unsafe Days

The three beaches with the most unsafe water days in 2017 – Ropes Park, Cole Park, and Emerald Beach – are all located in Corpus Christi, on the southern shore of the bay. All tested as unsafe for swimming on more than 10 days.

At Ropes Park, one sample site was unsafe for swimming on 24 days (42 percent of the days on which testing took place). At Cole Park, one sample site was unsafe for swimming on 20 days, and the Emerald Beach sampling site tested as unsafe for swimming on 14 days. Because each beach was tested fewer than 60 times during the year, there may have been many more days on which swimming was unsafe.

Waterways in Austin and Houston Frequently Exceeded Safe Bacteria Levels

Many waterways in Austin and Houston had high bacteria levels in 2017.

Austin: Of 76 test sites within the city limits, 46 exceeded bacteria levels safe for swimming at least once in 2017. Waterways that frequently had unsafe bacteria levels included Waller Creek, Walnut Creek, West Bouldin Creek, East Bouldin Creek, and Blunn Creek.

Houston: In the city's bayous, which sustain parks and provide fishing spots for area residents, all 44 sample sites had at least one day on which water was unsafe for contact recreation in 2017. Of those sites, 20 were tested as unsafe at least 75 percent of the days on which testing took place, and 12 sites were unsafe every single time they were tested. In Lake Houston, which is popular for boating and fishing, six out of nine testing sites exceeded safe levels of bacteria for contact recreation at least once in 2017.

Texas Water Pollution: Causes and Solutions



Urban and agricultural pollution are often to blame for unsafe water.

The fecal contamination indicated by high bacteria levels comes from a range of sources – urban runoff carrying animal waste from pets; sewage overflows and septic leaks carrying human waste; agricultural runoff carrying livestock waste manure from industrial-scale feedlots; and runoff carrying animal waste from wildlife such as deer, feral hogs and seagulls.

Texas can protect and restore its waterways.

Texans deserve access to clean, swimmable waters. But today, all too often, Texans looking to swim at the beach or tube down a river are deterred by warning signs – or worse, have their health put at risk. To keep Texas' water safe, policymakers should ensure:

- More frequent water testing, at more locations.
- More public posting of test results and warnings.
- Prevention of pollution at the source, whether from urban runoff, sewage systems or agricultural runoff.

*For more information and the full report,
please visit
www.environmenttexascenter.org*

