

Sauble Beach grapples with pollution

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By Valerie Hauch

The white sands of Sauble Beach are welcoming an influx of tourists and the water has tested safe for swimming — good news for visitors and locals following a high E. coli count in mid-June.

In its most recent weekly testing on June 26, the Grey Bruce Health Unit found 16 E. coli bacteria per 100 mL of water, meaning 11-kilometre Sauble Beach is safe for swimming. (The province considers a maximum of 100 safe, while Health Canada's limit is 200.)

On June 14, the health unit had "posted" the popular Lake Huron beach, warning people the water was unsafe for swimming due to an alarming reading of more than 972 E. coli bacteria per 100 mL of water. A posting does not mean the beach is closed — people can read the advisory and still choose to swim.

At the time, Grey Bruce medical officer of health Dr. Hazel Lynn said it was the highest level ever recorded for that time of year and she would not swim in the water, nor would she let her granddaughter.

That alarming bacterial count had Sauble Beach resident Larry Cowell, who suspects bad septic systems are contributing to lake pollution, calling on the Town of South Bruce Peninsula to bring in a water and sewage system. It's a must, he said, because without it, sooner or later "someone's going to die."

"I don't swim in the water, I'm scared to," the retiree said.

But during the summer season Sauble Beach's weekly testing "typically" has "good sample results," with bacterial readings mostly in the teens and 20s, said Andrew Barton, the health unit's manager of health protection. Nonetheless, he has noticed a "significant spike" early in the season over the last three years, before numbers drop to their normal lows for the rest of the summer.

The issue of whether the town should install a water and sewage system has long been a point of contention.

Cowell lives in a small area of town linked to the Wiarton water system which provides water he feels is safe. He said he is luckier than most residents of the Town of South Bruce Peninsula who have private deep drilled wells or "sand-point" wells, installed in sandy areas with a shallow water table.

Mayor John Close said he is "very concerned" about drinking water in the area and advises everyone to get their well water or sand-point water tested every year.

The beach posting in mid-June also worries him.

"Something is happening in June each year. If you look at the date for the last three years, within six days, we have had a (Sauble Beach) posting each year," he said. "We haven't been able to pin down if pollution in the lake is coming from septic systems or some other location."

A reinspection of private septic systems is underway, he said. South Bruce Peninsula council is also spending \$85,000 to test samples from the beach and 100 private wells. The results, expected this October, will also show if the bacteria is from humans. There has been speculation

that area cattle are getting into the Sauble River, which outlets at Sauble Beach.

Close said he isn't taking a stand yet on whether the town should get a water and sewage system. "I want to find out where the pollution is coming from, what can we do to remedy it. It has to be affordable, we can't bankrupt people."

Area councillor Marilyn Bowman said "there's no evidence that septic systems are causing health risks in the Sauble Beach area."

A 2011 report to council estimated the cost of an initial sewage treatment system at \$27.8 million.

"This is not an affluent town. . . . Fifty-one per cent of permanent residents live on or below the poverty level," Close said, referring to the slightly under 9,000 people who live in the area year-round. In summer this number can swell to between 40,000 and 60,000, he said.

Sauble is "Ontario's No. 1 beach and it's a great beach," said Close. "It's the bread and butter of the area."

Long-time resident Dan Rogers, 26, knows all about the livelihood-related attributes of the beach. For generations, his family has owned and maintained an open-to-the-public 300-metre section of Sauble Beach. The town provides garbage cans and the Twinings (family on his mother's side) cover the costs of beach preservation and run the adjacent business, Twinings Beachfront Parking.

What Rogers has noticed over the years — and which makes him leery of blaming faulty septic tanks for pollution problems — is that "people do use the lake as a bathroom." It's not unusual for him and his crew to find dirty diapers partially buried or just left on the sand dunes.

He'd want to see proof of a link to faulty private septic systems before he'd approve of the town embarking on an expensive water and sewage program.

Rogers admits that if the town continues to grow, a water and sewage system is inevitable "because you can only have so many septic systems in one area."