

Beaches blanketed with pollution

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By Kerry Cavanaugh, Staff Writer

Los Angeles County beaches got more polluted in 2003, but authorities were unsure what caused the dirtier water and increased health hazards for swimmers, the National Resource Defense Council said Thursday.

Officials issued nearly 1,500 daily health warnings for local beaches -- a 60 percent jump from 2002, said the report from the environmental watchdog group.

Authors of the report on the nation's coastline said the rising number of beach warnings in Southern California was a mystery and particularly troubling because there had been no significant increase in rainfall to wash pollutants out to sea nor increased monitoring of beaches.

"The water we're surveying got dirtier," said Anjali Jaiswal, an attorney in the NRDC's Coastal Water Quality Project. "A visit to the beach should not mean a visit to the doctor."

Los Angeles voters will be asked in November to approve a \$500 million bond measure to fund runoff cleanup projects and cut pollution flowing to the ocean. The bond would add \$57 a year to the average property tax bill in the city.

"We have to get back to the place where water in Los Angeles is drinkable, swimmable and fishable," Councilman Eric Garcetti said. "If we don't find the money now, we'll pay later in court judgments."

Los Angeles and neighboring cities are facing some 60 rules to clean up various pollutants flowing out to the ocean. Urban runoff is the primary beach polluter, carrying animal waste, oils and chemicals to the ocean.

High bacteria levels prompted the vast majority of health warnings and can increase the risk of colds, fevers, sore throats and diarrhea, according to the NRDC report.

However, there was no investigation into reasons for the increase in beach advisories or the sources of bacteria contamination, Jaiswal said. State law requires public health agencies to collect knee-deep ocean water samples weekly, but there is no mandate to determine the cause of the unhealthy water.

"We need the county and state to link beach closures and the sources of pollution so we know what's causing the spikes," Jaiswal said.

The county issued 98 health advisories for the stretch of water from Surfrider Beach to Santa Monica Beach, many of which lasted several days.

There were 27 for Will Rogers State Beach and 24 for Marina del Rey Beach. Zuma Beach had one health advisory over the year.

Often, storm drains carrying toxics, metals and animal waste from city streets far inland are a prime source of contamination. Los Angeles County's Recreational Health Program conducts the water quality testing, but doesn't have the budget nor the expertise to track down the sources of pollution.

"You're throwing a big dart into the ocean. It's hard to know why a particular exceedence occurs,"

said Bernard Franklin, acting chief environmental health specialist.

Los Angeles city and county have begun to install devices to divert dirty urban runoff in storm drains to sewage treatment plants during dry periods.

Report authors urged local governments to investigate and crack down on pollution sources, prevent sewage spills, clean up contaminated urban runoff and punish illegal dischargers of oil, chemicals and contaminants that travel from curb to storm drain to the ocean.