

TCEQ proposal could double water bacteria

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By Terri Richardson East Texas Community Newspapers

The Texas Commission on Environmental Quality proposed sweeping changes for water quality standards in March, including more permissive levels for E. Coli in recreational waters.

Beaches were closed this past weekend at Lake O' the Pines when E. Coli was found in higher concentrations than allowed.

"At Lake O' the Pines, we know the amount of bacteria is very high, and they're going to keep the beaches closed until the numbers come back below some standard," said Rick Lowerre, spokesman for the Caddo Lake Institute, one organization in the Cypress Basin watershed concerned with possible loosened restrictions on water quality.

Under changes proposed by the state agency, the standard allowing E. coli would double, he said. Lowerre said that would also double the chances for people to get sick.

Officials with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers blamed rainwater runoff two weeks ago in washing bacteria into the lake from chicken litter, cattle manure and other sources.

"They're not all going to get sick from E. Coli. They're going to get sick from viruses and other bacteria in the water," Lowerre said. "E. Coli is the simple measure that the water is polluted. If we increase the standard, then all those pollutants will increase."

TCEQ spokeswoman Andrea Morrow said current standards were set "optimistically" and when little was known about many bodies of water, so small and seasonal streams are held to the same recreational use standards as large lakes.

"Now, because of the agency's strong commitment to conduct restorative actions (pollution clean-up plans) for water bodies that don't meet standards, it's become important to ensure the standards for specific water bodies provide appropriate, realistic targets," she said.

Included in the proposal is a system for assigning the amount of bacteria permitted in each different body of water by its use and potential for recreation, she said. The most restrictive limit on bacteria would be for lakes and rivers where people go swimming, skiing or have other recreational contact.

If adopted, changes would be submitted to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency for review for compliance with the Clean Water Act and will not be enforced until also approved by the EPA, state officials said.

Roy Darville, ecologist at East Texas Baptist University in Marshall, said those changes normally take time. The last time TCEQ commissioners adopted changes to the Texas Water Quality Standards, it took the EPA seven years to finalize the standards with some proposals rejected and others modified, he said.