

TCEQ to maintain E. coli standards

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Terri Richardson, Marshall News-Messenger

Caddo Lake groups concerned with the lowering of standards for bodies of water in the Cypress Basin will take their fight to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to prevent lowered thresholds allowed for dissolved oxygen and pH in the lake.

However, a decision Wednesday to maintain the current limits on E. coli bacteria in recreational waters was deemed a "success story" by local groups seeking to protect Caddo Lake and other area bodies of water.

"They're not lowering (bacteria standards) for the top tier, the area that will be swimming or "primary contact" are not going to have lowered standards," said Rick Lowerre.

Lowerre is a spokesman for Caddo Lake Institute and a clearinghouse of organizations speaking out against changes to regulations, which they believe are detrimental to Caddo Lake.

"The (bacteria levels) for kayaking, boating and water skiing are going to be even more than 200 (colonies per mL) allowed," said Lowerre. "And they left the provision in so that they can change streams to lower categories."

The tiered system allows the state to set different bacteria allowances for different recreational uses. Streams and lakes considered "primary contact" will have lower limits with "non-contact" areas allowed to have thousands of E. Coli (the bacteria tested for) colonies per milliliter.

Texas environmental regulators decided Wednesday to keep strict limits for E. coli bacteria in recreational waters, opting against a contentious staff recommendation to relax the standard, which could have slightly increased the risk to public health, according to an Associated Press article.

The three-member, governor-appointed Texas Commission on Environmental Quality kept the stricter limit recommended by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, even though commission staff said relaxing the standard would give them more resources to deal with heavily polluted bodies of water, stated the article.

There are about 270 bodies of water in Texas that are above the E. coli standard. If the less stringent rules had been accepted, that number would have dropped to about 100, said Jim Davenport, an aquatic scientist with TCEQ, in the AP article.

Environmental groups and some local governmental bodies opposed relaxing the rules, arguing it would increase health risks for swimmers, boaters and others.

Davenport said the increased risk would have been slight. He said instead of eight in 1,000 people being at risk for gastrointestinal illnesses, 10 in 1,000 would have been at risk under the proposed looser standards, according to AP.

"So what they're really saying is that they are going to leave things that are clearly swimming areas at higher standards and other areas are going to have dropped standards," said Lowerre. "It's an important step forward, but they didn't give up entirely on the bacteria lowering (of standards). And they went ahead and did relax other standards for the Cypress Basin as far as dissolved oxygen and pH."

The TCEQ included relaxed standards specifically for the Cypress Basin in its sweeping proposal of changes, among which was a reduction of the pH levels from 6 to 5.5, which in terms of acidity means allowing more acidic conditions.

"That's a problem, and partly because the methylmercury we get in the fish is created in more acidic conditions," explained Lowerre. "The conversion from mercury to methylmercury is what happens in these acidic aquatic conditions."

Lowerre added that while this is bad, "it's less difficult to evaluate the added risk that this will create."

The Caddo groups are opposed pH lowering along with the dissolved oxygen equation. But Lowerre still called the state's choice to maintain strict levels in swimming areas "a significant success story."

The EPA will have months to accept or reject TCEQ's changes, so the focus for the Caddo Lake groups will now turn from TCEQ to EPA.

"When we did that in the 1990s, with the TCEQ's vote to lower standards for dissolved oxygen, the EPA rejected it," said Lowerre.

Those organizations included in the clearinghouse are city of Uncertain, Caddo Lake Area Chamber of Commerce and Tourism, Greater Caddo Lake Association of Texas, Louisiana Greater Caddo Lake Association, Friends of the Caddo Lake National Wildlife Refuge, Environmental Integrity Project, Clean Water Action, Texas Campaign for the Environment and Caddo Lake Institute.