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Bacteria levels alarming

By BLANTON SMITH - Taranaki Daily News Last updated 05:00 26/07/2010

Bacteria levels at two Waitara water-quality test sites have exceeded Ministry of Environment safety levels seven times within the space of four months, Taranaki Regional Council test results show.

The East Beach test site went over the accepted level twice, while upriver the Bertrand Rd bridge test site exceeded the limit five times.

New Plymouth audiologist Sandra Pacheco told the Taranaki Daily News a high bacteria count was a major cause of ear infections and could be behind claims by Waitara surfers of earaches after surfing near the river mouth.

Last week, surfers who competed near to the East Beach test site last weekend have complained of rashes and ear infections.

Waitara surfer and Taranaki District Health Board health promoter Jason Matthews says he has also suffered health problems after surfing his home breaks.

"I've suffered from eye infections and I've been out of the water for a year and haven't had one eye infection."

Water quality guidelines are based on the concentration of enterococci – a bacteria inhabiting the intestinal tract – per 100ml of water. When this number exceeds 140, daily measurements must be undertaken by the regional council unless explanation can be found.

District health board medical officer Greg Simmons says the board has recorded no illness directly related to the Waitara River, but it is difficult to attribute gastric illness to a definitive cause.

Bacteria levels at the Waitara East site exceeded ministry specifications on November 2, 2009 and January 6 this year. Taranaki Regional Council says elevated bacteria levels are the result of high river flows, with the increased volume of fresh water bumping up the bacteria count.

TRC test results also show significantly less sea life in areas surrounding the Waitara River mouth compared to control sites at Greenwood Rd, south of New Plymouth, and Turangi Rd, north of Waitara.

Waitara Bar Board Riders Club vice-president Simon Mould believes the lack of sealife is due to lime used to disinfect the effluent pumped out at the Waitara outfall.

"I'm pretty sure the crayfish and herrings don't like it either."

TRC environment spokesman Gary Bedford says sand movement, inundation of reefs and variations in substrate are the only factors that can be identified as affecting the level of sealife.

Lime can be dangerous in large quantities but shellfish need the chemical to build their shells.

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