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Safe to swim? Now you'll know 24/7

Story Discussion

BY HEATHER AUGUSTYN
Times Correspondent | Thursday, May 29, 2008 | 4 comment(s) Font Size:



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PORTAGE | A team of scientists braved the chilly waters of Lake Michigan on Wednesday to install equipment aimed at keeping swimmers safe this summer.

Richard Whitman, research ecologist and station chief at the Lake Michigan Ecological Research Station of the U.S. Geological Survey, said the efforts will improve communication between scientists and beach managers to establish more accurate methods of notifying the public when dangerous water conditions exist.

"Scientists just love a party, and this is a science party. This is a world-class excitement in our view and no one else is doing this in our backyard," Whitman said.

The equipment was being installed in Lake Michigan about 100 yards west of Burns Ditch in Portage. The data from the equipment will allow scientists to predict the conditions that are right for contaminants.

"Scuba divers from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Michigan State University, Wisconsin, and Indiana will install equipment to be able to tell swimmers the conditions they're swimming in 24/7. They're installing flow meters to determine direction and velocity of the water, meters to tell wave height and salt and ionic strength and turbidity, or to measure how many particles are in the water, and weather stations with light meters to test the UV light," Whitman said.

"We're looking for relationships between conditions that predispose contaminants on the beach, such as currents as they leave the river and go to the beach," Whitman said.

Current methods for testing contaminants are not as accurate as these new methods will be, said Meredith Nevers, aquatic biologist for the U.S. Geological Survey.

"Current beaches are monitored for fecal bacteria indicator, which is E. coli, and the labs take 24 hours. The E. coli concentration may have changed by the time of reporting," Nevers said.

E. coli is a fecal indicator bacteria and has been the accepted indicator for more than two decades. E. coli in Lake Michigan is a danger to the health of swimmers.

"If there is an E. coli presence in the water, there is sewage in the water, so there will likely be viruses and other pathogenic bacteria," Nevers said.

The new equipment promises to improve the accuracy of reporting E. coli levels.

"Our goal is to improve the accuracy and try to get all of the instruments remote access ready. This year will be a step toward improving that mathematical model of predicting an E. coli count based upon the indicators," Nevers said.

Whitman said that the excitement of Wednesday's installation of equipment is about improving water conditions and public health, but also about the collaboration itself.

"This is funded by the U.S. Geological Survey, the EPA, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Michigan State University, and Purdue."

IDEM announces online beach advisory system
Now that Lake Michigan's beach season is gearing up, the Indiana Department of Environmental Management has launched a Web site that allows residents to check whether a beach is open before leaving home.

IDEM has implemented the online BeachGuard software system to display information about beach closures and beach sampling results for monitoring locations along the coast of Lake Michigan. It's a free Web-based system that allows the public to access information from their home computers ahead of time to see if a particular beach has an alert. IDEM's Web address is <http://idem.IN.gov/beaches>.

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hmm... wrote on May 29, 2008 2:00 PM:

" stop dumping raw sewage into the lake. this is what sewage plants are for. every year people can swim for 2 weeks out of the summer cuz of the toxins in the water "

Augustyn wrote on May 29, 2008 9:42 AM:

" I agree with the poster on not pumping toxins into the lake, but this particular problem with E. coli is from sewage overflows when there is a rain event. "

Intellegence wrote on May 29, 2008 8:49 AM:

" Here's a thought, STOP PUMPING TOXINS INTO THE LAKE!!!! AND WE WOULDN'T NEED SUCH THINGS NOW WOULD WE??? "

Grateful... wrote on May 29, 2008 1:21 AM:

" We own a boat at the Portage marina so I am VERY grateful for the scientists hard work in keeping us safe! My son will be grateful also...I forsee many more swimming days in his future. Thanks again! "

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