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Deluge spills raw sewage onto beaches

Old and crumbling stormwater system designed to overflow at water's edge

Heavy rain and melting snow overwhelmed parts of Greater Victoria's sewage system yesterday, spilling raw waste onto beaches in Saanich, Oak Bay and Victoria.

Although the sewage was diluted with storm water, it presented enough of a public health risk that the Vancouver Island Health Authority posted signs warning people not to swim or wade into the water.

"Our best estimate is there could be a risk and you should be aware of the risk," said Richard Stanwick, VIHA's chief medical health officer.

People who come into contact with the contaminated water are at risk of an E. coli infection, he said.

Beaches stretching from Cadboro Bay in Saanich to Clover Point in Victoria were affected.

Much of the region's sewage and stormwater system is old and crumbling and was designed to overflow onto beaches when it exceeds capacity.

According to monitoring by the CRD, the number of stormwater discharges that rated a public health hazard hit a 13-year high in 2007. Yet despite the high ratings, the CRD cancelled its annual stormwater quality testing program last year, and refocused the money on finding pollution sources.

Stanwick has criticized that decision, as well as plans to build a \$1.2-billion sewage treatment system, saying neither addresses the public health hazard of stormwater overflows.

"The real question is, if we're concerned about what tourists think and being upset with tampons on the beach, well folks, that's still going to happen," said Stanwick.



It's the responsibility of the individual municipalities to replace their old and crumbling pipes. Oak Bay, which is considered the worst stormwater and sewage offender, is slated to spend \$10 million to fix its antiquated system.

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