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Stormwater is major polluter 1

Road runoff containing chemicals and human waste is fouling area beaches

Think of it as Greater Victoria's other sewage controversy — only this one doesn't get nearly as much attention, and treatment plants won't solve the problem.

The stormwater system, designed to drain rainwater from roads, is increasingly polluting local beaches with sewage and chemical contaminants, Capital Regional District tests show.

Public-health warnings from stormwater discharges are at a 13-year high, according to CRD results released last week. Some of the region's most popular beaches, from Victoria's Inner Harbour to Ross Bay, the Gorge Waterway, Portage Inlet, Saxe Point and Oak Bay, are rated a high public health risk for fecal coliforms — mainly human and animal feces.

"If we are looking for real risks to public health, this is the one," said Dr. Richard Stanwick, Vancouver Island's medical health officer. "My plea is do not ignore this, in terms of planning for our aging sewer system. ... This is something that should be causing some angst."

Contact with fecal coliforms can lead to infections and illnesses, although Stanwick said the worst human exposure occurs in the fall and winter.

The stormwater system typically starts in ditches and culverts, where it funnels rainwater away from the street.

The pipes carry water — by then contaminated with oil, copper, lead, zinc and other vehicle pollutants — to an outfall at the nearest beach, stream or lake. The outfall looks like a metal pipe, usually with a grate, and can discharge directly onto rocks, sand or water used by people.

The chemicals, along with trash and other items picked up throughout the system, caused 22 environmental hazard ratings at regional beaches in 2007.

But raw sewage is also getting into the pipes, largely, in some areas, from crumbling municipal sewer pipes that leak into the stormwater system, the CRD said. Another major problem is homeowners who mistakenly connect their plumbing to the wrong pipes, releasing their flushables directly into the storm system and onto beaches.

"We've had testers out sampling [pipes] ... and had toilet paper and stuff go by," said Dale Green, of CRD environmental services.

The CRD has proposed sewage-treatment plants for the region, at a cost of up to \$1.2 billion, but most municipal sewage-treatment systems do not treat stormwater.

"We could spend \$1.2 billion on sewage treatment and still end up with turds on the beach," Stanwick said.

The CRD tested 175 stormwater pipes in 2007 and registered 41 as high publichealth hazards. The numbers have crept up from a low of 22 in 2001 and now sit at 1994 levels.

"I'm extremely concerned," said Laura Taylor, the CRD's senior manager of scientific programs. "We've said, 'We have got to change what we're doing because it is not working.' "

Most of the easy sources of contamination have been eliminated, leaving only hard-to-find broken pipes and cross-connected sewer lines, she said.

The CRD tests the stormwater discharge sites twice a year, in the summer and fall. But, in a move not everyone is praising, CRD politicians voted Wednesday to stop testing for two years and refocus the approximately \$250,000 testing budget on finding the source of the worst problems.

Stanwick said he'd prefer to see the sampling program continue, but Taylor said the new plan is a better use of resources. However, she acknowledged no matter what the CRD does, it is ultimately up to municipalities to make repairs because they own the pipes.

Most of the problems are in Victoria, Oak Bay and Esquimalt. "I'd like to see municipalities put more money into it," she said.

Repairs can be expensive. The City of Victoria has spent millions on small-scale stormwater treatment plants and to reline broken pipes in James Bay.

Oak Bay is slated to spend \$10 million to upgrade its antiquated and crumbling combined sewer system, which carries stormwater and sewage in a single pipe and overflows onto the beach during heavy rainfall.

Meanwhile, Stanwick said he's considering putting up health warning signs to ask people not to use certain beaches for three or four days after it rains.

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