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## High water marks for region

### Coastline's pollution scores are improving, beach report says

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San Diego County's beaches were mostly pollution-free in the 12 months ending March 31, except for several located at the mouths of creeks, rivers or lagoons.

The region's improved beach water quality was largely the result of dramatically lower rainfall versus a year ago, according to the statewide Beach Report Card published yesterday by the Santa Monica-based environmental group Heal the Bay. Rain generates urban runoff pollution.

During the period covered by the report card – April 1, 2005, to March 31 – the county's rainfall was 4.64 inches. In the previous 12-month period, the total was 22.77 inches.

The report evaluates water quality at 486 beaches statewide, including 93 from San Onofre to the U.S. - Mexico border. Water-quality officials widely endorse it as a comprehensive gauge of beach pollution.

Heal the Bay grades beaches on an A to F scale in three categories: dry weather, wet weather and overall performance. The better the grade a beach receives, the lower the risk of illness to ocean users at that site. The grades reflect bacteria testing by various public agencies.

Eighty-nine percent of San Diego County beaches scored an A or a B based on water testing from April through October 2005, which is considered the dryer portion of the year. The region's total exceeded the statewide average of 85 percent.

San Diego County's beaches also showed "vast improvement" during wet weather, the report found. Local beaches with good water quality during wet weather soared to 73 percent, compared with 46 percent in the previous two years.

Four local beaches received an overall grade of F. They were: San Onofre State Beach at the mouth of San Mateo Creek; Leisure Lagoon in Mission Bay; and two border-area beaches, one three-quarters of a mile north of the Tijuana River and the other at the mouth of the river.

Perhaps the biggest surprise is the F grade for the mouth of San Mateo Creek, which drains one of the county's more pristine watersheds and supports a population of endangered steelhead



K.C. ALFRED / Union-Tribune

Julian Gonzales Jr., 4, of Jamul couldn't go in the water at Imperial Beach yesterday because signs warned of high bacteria levels. The mouth of the Tijuana River south of Imperial Beach was listed No. 8 on Heal the Bay's statewide list of the 10 most polluted beaches.

trout.

The creek runs along the northern border of Camp Pendleton. During wet weather, it empties into the surf zone at San Onofre State Beach's world-famous Trestles surfing beach.

County health officials said the failing grade is not warranted. They criticized Heal the Bay's grading method and cited higher-than-normal flows in the creek.

County records show that the waterway's mouth was posted for bacteria contamination 75 days in 2005. Yet the creek received a lower grade than the mouth of the San Luis Rey River in Oceanside, which was posted 218 days during the same period.

Heal the Bay also compiles a statewide list of the 10 most polluted beaches. San Diego County had one beach on that tally – the mouth of the Tijuana River south of Imperial Beach, which came in at No. 8.

By comparison, seven beaches in Los Angeles County were on the list.

Mark Gold, Heal the Bay's executive director, praised San Diego County's Department of Environmental Health for its diligence in water testing and for embracing cutting-edge technology. The department is the only one in the state using data from a high-tech radar system to track pollution, Gold said.

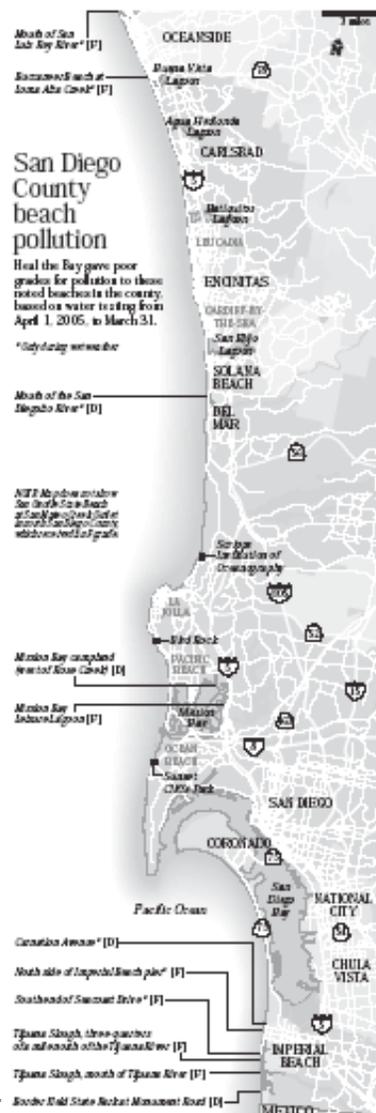
The system, which is operated by the Scripps Institution of Oceanography, monitors ocean currents that often push polluted water from the mouth of the Tijuana River north toward Imperial Beach and Coronado.

Yesterday's report criticized the state Water Resources Control Board for not enforcing laws requiring communities to track down the sources of bacteria fouling their waterways.

"It is the law and they are ignoring the law," Gold said.

Water testing methods in Southern California remain inconsistent from county to county, resulting in sets of data that are hard to compare, the report said.

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