

✓ Just how safe is the water?

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5-11-90

BOULDER CREEK — With the approach of swimming weather, county health officials say most of the San Lorenzo River and creeks throughout the county remain relatively safe for swimming, compared to river and creek mouths, which are notorious for teaming bacterial life.

Officials are stepping up their efforts to sample for water safety in area swimming holes. When samples show coliform bacteria levels greater than that allowed by state standards, officials post warnings to keep swimmers away. Coliform bacteria is the type that grows in animal and human waste, making their presence a good indicator of what water to avoid.

While coliform bacteria might not make you sick, they could be accompanied by nastier organisms, like the ones that cause cholera, hepatitis A, and typhoid. Less seriously, contaminated wa-

ter can cause upset stomachs, and skin and ear infections.

Starting Memorial Day, the Environmental Health Services will check the bacterial levels of popular swimming holes from Boulder Creek to Capitola Lagoon from week to week, rather than once a month.

The county's rivers and creeks have been exceeding acceptable levels of bacteria since the 1970s when the county began testing them, said Water Quality Project Manager John Ricker.

"We'd like to think they're getting better," Ricker said. "We've been eliminating failing septic systems but we still end up with high counts from other sources."

Dogs, horses, and birds contribute to the pollution of rivers and streams. Run-off waters after rainstorms send bacterial counts soaring.

Capitola Lagoon, the mouths of the San Lorenzo River and Aptos Creek are unsafe for swimming most of the time, officials say.

WATER POLLUTION

Swimming spots along the San Lorenzo River vary in bacteria levels. In 1988, for example, the river mouth was fouled by bacteria and was unsafe for swimming all year 'round. At Sycamore Grove, the waters passed muster all year. Swimming was unsafe in Felton 35 percent of the time, while in Ben Lomond the waters proved consistently safe.

At Brookdale, the San Lorenzo showed unsafe levels of bacteria throughout 1988. Ricker said the problem was traced to a flock of ducks amassed there because a resident was feeding them.

Where the San Lorenzo flows through Boulder Creek, bacteria counts dropped sharply from 1987 to 1988, but still failed 15 percent of the time in 1988.

As to the desirability of plunging into a swimming hole when the bacterial levels are deemed acceptable by the county, well, that can be a personal decision.

"I would probably swim in some of them," said Ricker. "I certainly would keep my mouth closed."