

Tests show high level of E. coli in St. Croix River

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ST. STEPHEN, New Brunswick - The river that serves as the international boundary between New Brunswick and Maine has high levels of E. coli, according to a local watchdog environmental agency.

Tests conducted at several locations in St. Stephen over the past two years have revealed that the St. Croix River has an Escherichia coli level that is off the charts, according to the St. Croix Estuary Project Inc.

E. coli is a pathogenic bacterium commonly found in the intestines of warm-blooded animals. E. coli is not always confined to the intestine, and its ability to survive for brief periods outside the body enables for testing environmental samples for fecal contamination. It has caused deaths in Canadian localities such as Walkerton and Saint John, Art MacKay, biologist and SCEP's executive director, said in a press release.

Last week, SCEP, formed in 1992 by 25 local and governmental groups, released its annual "Environmental Health of the St. Croix Estuary," providing comparative results for various monitoring sites from St. Stephen to St. Andrews.

MacKay said that E. coli levels at some outfall sites at St. Stephen are "off scale."

Town officials said Wednesday they were aware of the problem and were fixing it.

The St. Croix Estuary stretches in Maine from Baileyville south to Eastport and inland to Oak Bay and St. Andrews, New Brunswick. The estuary is one of several major estuaries within the Bay of Fundy, but the St. Croix is unique because it includes an international river that separates the U.S. and Canada.

Estuaries are water bodies where salt and fresh waters mix.

The St. Croix estuary and nearby coastal waters also are part of a historically and economically diverse region of southwest New Brunswick and Maine's northeastern Washington County. In the heart of the estuary is St. Croix Island where French explorers Samuel de Champlain and Sieur de Mons established the first North American colony. The archaeological record of aboriginal people in the estuary dates back thousands of years.

So reports of E. coli in this valuable ecological area is cause for concern.

In 2004, SCEP published the results of an intensive two-year study of the St. Croix River Estuary. "This study was exhaustive," MacKay said. "And it forms the foundation of our annual monitoring program."

The agency established fixed sampling sites along the river from St. Stephen to St. Andrews and each year sampled for bacteria, basic chemicals and pollutants. They also checked to make sure the right plants and animals were still there.

"Each year we choose a new 'hot spot' to try to fix, and each year we check to see what has been accomplished," MacKay said. "Our first choice was east. The waterfront of St. Stephen was leaking high levels of ... sewage debris and other pollutants. It became our first target."

That year, SCEP reported its findings about the seven highly polluted outfalls it had found to the St. Stephen Town Council. Then-Mayor Bob Brown promised the sites would be cleaned up in seven years

and to some extent that promise has been kept, MacKay said.

Problems remain, however.

E. coli counts at outfalls at the cove, near the downtown Ferry Point Bridge, the kiosk at the downtown visitors center and at the Chocolate Park on Main Street continue to show counts that are very high, according to MacKay.

"The upshot of this is that the waterfront of St. Stephen continues to be a very dangerous place and there is no immediate possibility of recreational activities there unless this is cleaned up," he said.

MacKay acknowledged that fixing the problem was costly, but said it has to be done. Some changes can be made immediately by fixing a drainage pipe, while others will take longer.

St. Stephen Mayor Allan Gillmor said Wednesday that the town was aware of the problem and working to rectify it. The town recently built a new sewage treatment plant.

"There are still two or three spots that need to be remediated," he said.

Gillmor said people should not be alarmed. "I don't think there is any more concern than there has been for years," he said. "Our problem is we are dealing with an old infrastructure, and to get everything flowing in that same direction is our biggest problem." The town still has storm and sanitary sewers that are tied together.

Fixing the problem will cost money. "I know one of the outfalls to fix it is about \$250,000," he said.

Calais Assistant City Manger Jim Porter said Wednesday that at one time the city faced a similar problem.

"We can understand and empathize with St. Stephen's problems," he said. "Just a short while ago we were having bypasses of our own from our pumping stations so we're not going to point fingers at them. I am sure they are working diligently to address the problems. It helps that there are groups like the St. Croix Estuary Project that keeps an eye on us all."

When Calais' system was breached several years ago spilling sewage into the river, the city was fined \$50,000. That fine was put toward repairs. "There are 10 pump stations," Porter said. "I think there are two minor ones that need to be updated, but the others are state-of-the art with backup generators, and nothing bypasses into the river any more."

The assistant city manager said the city has spent millions of dollars in loans and grants to fix the problem. "And that has been passed on to the ratepayers and our ratepayers are paying for that," he said.

Porter said there was no question that the goal of both communities is a clean waterfront.

"I am sure we are going to get there soon. They are doing the best they can," he said of St. Stephen. "But it doesn't hurt that someone is holding us all accountable."

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