

Area beaches under advisory

By **STEVE REILLY** STAFF WRITER

Florida Department of Health officials issued precautionary health warnings Friday for Port Charlotte Beach, Stump Pass Beach and Colony Don Pedro IV.

Recent water samples showed levels of enteric bacteria — which includes fecal coliform and other bacteria found in the intestinal tracts of humans and animals — at higher levels than the recommended Environmental Protection Agency water quality standards.

The enteric bacteria levels can rise due to stormwater runoff or runoff from pets, wildlife or human waste. Scott Schermerhorn, a health department environmental specialist, said such increases in the bacteria are expected after the first rains and runoff following extended dry periods.

Higher bacteria levels in the Englewood area, Schermerhorn said, should be limited to areas closest to Stump Pass Beach. The public beaches on Manasota Key north of the pass will be safe from the contamination.

Signs were posted Friday at the entrance and in the parking lot of Stump Pass Beach. The precautionary advisories recommend that people not swim due to an increased risk of illness. The signs will remain posted until bacteria levels decline to acceptable levels. The health department will be retesting the water and expects those results Wednesday.

“We are not closing the beach,” Schermerhorn stressed. The precautionary warning is just that, he suggested, an effort to ensure public awareness of potential risks.

Palm Island Resort is located on the southern banks of Stump Pass, but health officials posted precautionary warnings at Colony Don Pedro IV, south of the resort at Don Pedro Island and north of the state park.

Don Pedro State Park is south of Palm Island, and state rangers expect the Memorial Day weekend will be full of beachgoers as usual. State park manager Chad Lach said he and his staff are notified directly by health department officials if any problem exists, and that they hadn’t heard from them Friday.

E-mail: reilly@sun-herald.com



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This and other health department signs at Stump Pass Beach may have beachgoers reconsidering whether they want to go for a swim.