

## OUR VIEW

# Nothing royal about this type of flush

OUR POSITION: Beach health advisories will continue until we deal with septic tank pollution.

Good, strong summer rains may help our gardens grow and replenish low aquifers, but they also power-wash our landscape. That means dog-droppings, automotive oil, debris, grass clippings, fertilizer and sewage gets scrubbed from the ground and flushed into the swales, brooks, canals, creeks, rivers and bays into the Gulf of Mexico.

You can bank on it during the subtropical rainy season in Southwest Florida. And just as surely, you can bet health department warning signs will go up on area beaches. Last weekend, precautionary beach advisories were posted in Charlotte County at Englewood Beach, the Port Charlotte Beach Complex, Knight Island and Boca Grande. Swimmers were warned that the presence of high bacteria levels could be harmful to their health. Again.

It is disgusting. Here's how the Charlotte County Health Department put it in a press release: "The presence of enteric bacteria is an indication of fecal pollution, which may come from stormwater runoff, pets, wildlife and human sewage."

In other words, our beaches are toilet bowls, at least momentarily.

Enteric bacteria? Again, the Health Department, which tests water in nine locations weekly as part of the state's Healthy Beaches Monitoring Program: "If high concentrations of enteric bacteria are ingested or enter through an open cut or sore, they may cause human disease or infection. The most common symptoms include rashes, diarrhea, nausea and vomiting."

It sounds one of those mandatory warnings for new drugs on otherwise cheery TV commercials. Again, disgusting.

The Health Department did not close the beaches. It is only an advisory and a recommendation that swimming in polluted water increases the risk of illness. Proceed with caution. And the advisories were lifted on Wednesday.

But keep the causes in mind.

We will continue to pound the table about the need to replace the many individual septic tanks with central sewer systems. The proliferation of septic in our region simply means water pollution will be a problem for years to come.

But there are simple things individuals can do to help and they won't cost a dime. For one thing, pick up after your dog. We have no illusions that elected officials would be eager to climb out on a limb and enact a pooper-scooper ordinance. Enforcement would be difficult, to say the least, although we do think the mere presence of a law on the books often sways public behavior.

For the time being, it will be a matter of personal responsibility. So pick up after your dog when you go out for a walk. It isn't difficult; just tuck a plastic grocery or newspaper bag in your back pocket.

Research and follow county fertilizer rules. Don't dump nitrogen fertilizer on your lawn during the summer months. It's a waste of money and it pollutes the waterways, since much of the fertilizer gets flushed away in the heavy rains. Also remember not to leave your nitrogen-heavy grass clippings on the street or sidewalks, where they also get carried away in the runoff.

Fertilizer pollutes gradually. This specific problem, however, is with enteric bacteria from "fecal pollution." A recent report from the Natural Resources Defense Council noted that 6 percent of Charlotte County's bacteria-monitoring samples were elevated last year; Sarasota County logged 4 percent. Of the 33 coastal counties in the report, Charlotte ranked 13th on the most-polluted list, and Sarasota was 17th.

The biggest problem is at Port Charlotte Beach. The eastern part of the beach was closed 14 days in 2009, the western side 38 days. Nearly onethird of all samples there had elevated bacteria levels.

Charlotte County Environmental Health Administrator Herman Velasco told the Sun the reason was clear: failing septic tanks in Port Charlotte.

Sooner or later, the problem will have to be addressed. Until then, keep your eyes peeled for the warning signs.