

Lake O' the Pines beach, swim areas to remain closed

Activities in jeopardy for July 4th weekend

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The beaches and designated swimming areas at Lake O' the Pines will remain closed through Thursday, and the Fourth of July weekend is in jeopardy of having the areas closed, the lake manager reported Monday.

Meanwhile, state environmental regulators were awaiting results of E. coli testing in the main body of the lake. Staff from the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality office in Tyler took water samples outside the swimming areas this past Thursday.

The announcement of continued closure of the swimming areas came Monday as the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers gathered fresh water samples to be checked for fecal contamination. Unhealthy levels of the bacteria, fecal coliform, prompted the corps to close all seven designated swimming areas at the lake 10 days ago.

Reservoir Manager Bobby Hamrick said high contaminant readings have closed the beaches before, but never for this duration.

"We've never been here before," Hamrick said. "So it's all new to us. The bottom line — in regards to our regulations, the beaches are still closed. And we tested today, and we'll get those results back Thursday, and if they don't meet the standard it appears the beaches are going to be closed for the Fourth of July."

A spokesman for the Corps of Engineers regional headquarters in Fort Worth stressed that the rest of the lake is open for boating, skiing, fishing and other recreational use. Spokesman Clay Church could not address whether water outside the Corps swimming areas is safe.

"The Corps of Engineers owns the vessel, the actual lake that the water is in," Church said. "The water belongs to the state of Texas. All I can talk about is those areas we are responsible for."

The Texas Commission on Environmental Quality is responsible for water quality in the rest of the lake, spokeswoman Andrea Morrow said Monday. She said results from samples taken last week from the lake outside the swimming areas were not available.

"We did testing for the seven swimming beaches for the Corps," she said. "We also did some other tests, surface water quality testing, from the lake, but that data has not been fully vetted by the lab yet."

Morrow said the state health department would issue appropriate advisories, warnings or outright bans at the lake if those results show high levels of E. coli bacteria outside the swimming areas.

The two agencies' tests are slightly different. The corps of engineers tests for fecal coliform, the bodily wastes of humans and animals. The state tests for E. coli, which is considered an indicator bacteria because its detection suggests the presence of a range of bacterial contaminants including fecal coliform.

Reports of contamination at the beach have put marina owners and the rest of the tourism-dependent Lake O' the Pines community on edge.

On the north shore, fishing guide Bubba Romine said traffic on the lake is low.

"It has hurt everybody," he said. "Last week, I saw probably five boats. And this (past) weekend, we probably had, oh, eight or nine a day counting Sea-Doos (personal watercraft). Friends of mine that were going to rent places there, they called and cancelled ... from Oklahoma City and Houston and everywhere."

Romine probably doesn't know Randy Griffin, a Dallas resident who had been planning a family weekend on the lake he found through an online search.

"I've never been there at all," he said. "We're renting an RV, and we've never done anything like this before so we said, Let's do it."

That was before he learned of the closures on the Corps of Engineers website and searched for newspaper articles.

"I've got a 3-year-old, and that's a little much," he said. "You run a risk, because she's going to swallow water. We cancelled our reservation and found another lake we're going to go to."

Johnson Creek Marina Assistant Manager Sue Cook reported no one cancelled cabin reservations by Monday afternoon.

"We're all booked up for the Fourth of July," she said, taking the opportunity to pitch a free fireworks show after sundown Saturday. "Our barges are going out. We're all booked up for the Fourth of July. ... Cross your fingers for us."