

VIEWPOINTS

OUR VIEW

Being better stewards
of our natural resources

All the swimming areas at Lake O' The Pines have been cleared as having safe levels of E. coli bacteria and this is good news not only for those who enjoy the recreation, but for those who reap the economic benefits of visitors who come to the area.

We want the businesses there to do well, but mostly this is a public health issue. The pressure of economics should never trump the well-being of those who use the lake. It was also good to see that testing away from the shore areas showed even far lower levels of E. coli, which means in the middle of the lake, where people swim off boats and water ski, there is almost no risk of getting sick.

The high levels of E. coli — we were told by one academic source that the tests were “off the charts” — were likely caused by heavy rains that washed chicken litter from nearby production houses down to streams and into the lake. Since heavy rains like this don't often occur in the summer, when people usually swim, we don't usually see the problem.

In winter and early spring it could well be just as bad as it was recently tested. Since public health is not affected, it is not seen as being something to worry about.

But it would be wrong to think that it does not matter or that it isn't important.

Testing is done for E. coli because it is seen as a benchmark for all manner of other bacteria and pollutants that might be in the lake. If the E. coli presence is acceptable, then the others probably are, too. This rationale makes sense because E. coli occurs in the fecal matter of every mammal.

Fecal matter raises the nutrient level of the lake, which is not, as it might first sound, a good thing. Ultimately, the higher the nutrient level the lower the amount of oxygen level in the water.

Oxygen in the water is how fish breathe and thrive. Reduce that too much and you will have a lake that does not properly support life. From the point of view of those who like to sport fish, there will be a lot fewer nibbles on the hook. The bigger the fish the more oxygen is needed to support healthy life.

Eventually, the nutrient levels can grow so high the lake is considered “dead.” For a body of water the size of Lake O' The Pines, this is unlikely, but not impossible.

The story is different a few miles away at our own cherished Caddo Lake, which is both much smaller and much more shallow than Lake O' The Pines.

So what does regular E. coli testing show at Caddo?

Nothing. There is no regular E. coli testing done there. Some testing is done but not in the same manner as Lake O' The Pines because it costs money and it is not seen to have the same public health concern. Remember that the next time you go swimming in Caddo, though, particularly a day or two after a big rain upstream in the watershed.

But the bigger issue is what all of this is doing to the health of the lake, which is already in a precarious condition because of many other factors, including invasive plants and pollution from surrounding power plants.

East Texans take many of our wonderful natural resources for granted. The scare at Lake O' The Pines should be a warning that it is time to stop doing that forever forward. We are stewards of what we have and we should do better than we have in the past.