

Ever see a river absorb bacteria?

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River's rising bacteria levels investigated

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Water districts in Calaveras and San Joaquin counties plan to investigate the source of heightened levels of fecal bacteria in the Calaveras River in coming months. More than 50 samples tested by Lafayette-based consultant Tetra Tech Inc. between May 2003 and May 2004 showed high levels of overall bacteria and fecal bacteria that indicate "mammals are involved" in the problem, said Kevin Kauffman, Stockton East Water District's general manager. The Stockton water district draws its water from the river, dammed behind New Hogan Reservoir.

The report says the level of bacteria exceeds health standards and could lead to human health concerns, but both Kauffman and Calaveras County Public Health Officer Dr. Dean Kelaita said they don't believe there is any immediate threat to public health. The tests were conducted in both San Joaquin and Calaveras counties for Stockton East and the Calaveras County Water District, which also draws water from the river.

Raised levels of bacteria were found in areas around housing developments, where runoff from septic tanks may be polluting the water, Kauffman said. For example, in Cosgrove Creek in Valley Springs, a tributary of the Calaveras, "fairly high" amounts of overall bacteria and fecal bacteria were found. "That's more attributed to the individual homes along La Contenta and Valley Springs," Kauffman said. And in another Calaveras River tributary, Cherokee Creek, which runs through San Andreas, bacteria levels were found at about the same level as those in Valley Springs, he said. "It does look like they're worse upstream," he said. Kauffman explained that the bacteria is absorbed by the Calaveras River and, by the time it reaches lower areas such as New Hogan Reservoir, the numbers are much lower. He said he wasn't surprised by the results of the tests and doesn't believe it will be a danger to people using the river or the reservoir. But he said the water districts, with help from county environmental health departments, will investigate the sources of the bacteria to ensure homeowners' septic systems are in compliance and ranchers are not allowing waste from livestock to wash into the river. More tests will need to be done to figure out if the fecal bacteria is coming from humans, livestock or wildlife, Tetra Tech's report says. According to the report, a lack of plant life on the river contributes to the high levels of bacteria in the water.

The water is unsafe to drink, but Kauffman said he doubts any savvy campers or hikers will drink from the waterways without first filtering the water. And he doesn't consider the water too dangerous to swim in. When fecal bacteria levels reach a certain level, signs must be posted to warn people of the heightened levels, Kelaita said. He said he plans to ask for more information about the levels of bacteria in the watershed and said he wants more recent figures because the levels may have changed since 2004.

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