Cleaning up the Tangipahoa

Problem recognized 10 years ago; citizens panel seeks answers

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News of dangerous pollution in the Tangipahoa River has been filtering out of state agencies for a week now, and people in Tangipahoa Parish are starting to ask what is going to be done about it.

Parish officials have known there was a problem with raw human and animal waste in the river as long ago as 1978. The parish government proposed 10 years ago that electrical service be denied anyone who didn't have a proper sewage treatment system, but backed off in the face of objections of people who didn't want to pay for the systems.

Operators of campgrounds, canoe rental operations, restaurants and others connected with the tourist industry say they're going to have to pay now because of an anticipated drop in business as a result of the information about fecal coliform bacteria in the water.

A study of the level of germs in the streams by a researcher at Southeastern Louisiana University came to light last summer. The most noticeable reaction was a decision in September by the Southeast Louisiana Girl Scout Council to prohibit campers at Camp Whispering Pines near Independence from having contact with the water.

In February a citizens committee was appointed by Parish President Gordon Burgess to propose solutions to the problem, and the members' first meeting centered on regulations similar to those rejected in the past that would require an effective sewage treatment system before any home, business or public entity could obtain electrical service.

The committee, called the Pure Waters Commission, issued a statement this week saying it is gathering information and at this time has no recommendations on remedial action for the Parish Council to consider.

The statement said the level of human and animal waste in parish streams and roadside ditches is abnormally high and poses a serious threat to all people in the parish.

"These wastes contain fecal coliforms considered to be detrimental to the health of our families," it said.

"We have established the problem and are aware of those concerned individuals who desire to become a part of the solution. We are presently conferring with other parishes with similar problems and will closely review their recommendations," the committee's statement said.

Humans who go into the water will be susceptible to symptoms such as eye, ear and throat infections, abdominal cramps, diarrhea and vomiting, according to Gwen Stewart, spokeswoman for the state Health Department.

"People need to be aware that any time they swim in a lake or stream they are doing so at some danger," Stewart said. "There is always the possibility of health risk."

"Because of the number of people who use the Tangipahoa River, the advisory was issued to let people know there is a health hazard if they come into primary or secondary contact," the health official said.

She said primary contact includes swimming and water skiing and secondary contact includes boating and fishing.

Two other bodies of water in the state, Lake Pontchartrain near New Orleans and Bayou Teche, also are the subjects of Health Department warnings, Stewart said.

Although brochures printed earlier refer to the parish as the tubing and recreational capital of Louisiana, proprietors of businesses along the river express uncertainty about the coming warm-weather season.

"I feel we've been given a raw deal," said Anita April, president of the Campground Owners' Association and manager of Hidden Oaks Campground east of Hammond.

"The DEQ (state Department of Environmental Quality) didn't do its job and we're paying for it," April said.

"They tested the water when it was high. We all know its worse when it's flooded," April said. "As far as I'm concerned the river is better now than it's ever been."

"All I can say is I'm going to seek legal advice. I'm inviting people to use this river. Where does that put me?" she said.

April said the fact that the upstream town of Amite has put in a new sewage treatment plant into operation should help.

She said it is too early in the year to tell of the health advisory would cut down on customers.

At Yogi Bear's Jellystone Park near Robert, Myrle Wiggins said the advisory won't have a direct effect because the campground isn't on the river.

"We have a pool and a little man-made pond and don't use the river for business," she said. "Of course I have a house and children here and it's not something you like to live with."

Jean Fahr, director of camping for the Girl Scout Council headquartered in New Orleans, said that after talking with Health Department officials last fall it was decided "we couldn't jeopardize the health of our youth."

She said the portion of Camp Whispering Pines near the Tangipahoa River won't be used again until it meets federal and state standards for water quality.

"It is business as usual at the camp," Fahr said. "We use it year around. We just don't have canoeing and swimming in the river any more."

"The state is really down-playing this," she said. "There could be any kind of virus in that water. I know for a fact they have a plan for cleaning up the Tangipahoa River."

"I know this is a hardship for a lot of businesses, but for the overall good it's worth it," Fahr said. "I think this will happen on every other stream in our state."

"The residents of the parish need to identify the problem as theirs," she said. "The people could take care of their own sewage, and the dairy industry, municipalities, campgrounds and schools could too."

"The state could identify the point sources of pollution, but it hasn't done that," Fahr said. "There are infra-red aerial photos that show it."

"I do feel there is movement now to take care of the problem," she said.

Stewart said the Health Department hasn't posted the river because there are too many points of entry and the signs would be stolen.

"The best method we have is to advise people through the media," she said. "And the entire river isn't contaminated all the time."

She said officials take water samples from between 200 and 300 locations around the state every month to monitor potential problems. Five samples within a 30-day period are taken before an "advisory" is issued, she said.

Stewart said the first step is a request by the DEQ for monitoring, then Health Department laboratories are used to test the water samples, the DEQ evaluates the information from the lab and then the DEQ makes a recommendation to the Health Department about issuing an advisory.

Stewart and Fahr agreed that people probably will continue to swim and boat in the river despite the health risk.