



Macomb Daily file photo

Macomb County received \$100,000 from the state to develop an advanced beach testing process at Lake St. Clair Metropark.

Macomb County gets bulk of state money for beach testing

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A 2014 project to revolutionize pollution tests at Great Lakes beaches will take place in Macomb County, but health departments across the state are apparently unhappy with the arrangement.

Macomb will receive \$100,000 to develop a real-time beach monitoring system based on DNA testing, an amount that swallows up two-thirds of Michigan's entire federal allocation for water quality testing and leaves many counties with no funding at all.

No one disputes the worthiness of the project, which should provide Lake St. Clair test results that determine levels of E. coli contamination within two to three hours, rather than the current outdated system that relies upon laboratories that cannot determine whether bacteria levels are abnormally high for swimmers until the next day.

"At my town hall meetings, people have told me, 'What good is it if we go into the water and then we find out a day or two later that the beach should have

been closed?'" said state Rep. Anthony Forlini, a Harrison Township Republican who was the leading force behind the \$100,000 allocation.

State Department of Environmental Quality officials said the Macomb effort eventually could improve water testing statewide. But because only \$152,000 is available for monitoring in 2014, just 10 county health departments will share what's left after the Macomb grant. Thirty-seven previous recipients will get nothing.

"We should all get our share of the pie," said Sarah U'Ren, program director for The Watershed Center Grand Traverse Bay, a non-profit organization that monitors waters off a dozen beaches in Grand Traverse, Benzie and Leelanau counties. "We get a large number of tourists up here. We want to be able to tell those people, and people who live here, that it's safe to go in the water."

Exposure to E. coli, which typically derives from sewer and drain

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overflows, can cause diarrhea, vomiting, fever, abdominal pains and skin rashes.

The now-defunct Macomb County Water Quality Board tried for years to secure funding for real-time monitoring of the county's beaches, which have infamously endured thousands of closures due to dangerous E. coli levels over the past two decades.

Beyond that period of time, Macomb provided county funds to maintain a

vigilant beach monitoring program that consisted of testing four Lake St. Clair swimming areas twice weekly in the warm weather months.

Many other counties on the Great Lakes shoreline provided testing just once monthly or only for a series of weeks in June to August.

Federal funding to assist with beach monitoring began about a decade ago, with the DEQ determining how to distribute the money across the state.

Gary White, deputy director of the Macomb County Health Department, said the real-time monitoring

work will take place at Lake St. Clair Metropark (formerly Metro Beach) in Harrison Township, one of the busiest lakeside parks in Michigan.

The long-anticipated project was handed off to Wayne State University and the Huron-Clinton Metroparks Authority, or HCMA, because "we didn't want to make it look like we were trying to hog up all the money," White said.

"We collect a (water) sample in the morning and it takes 18 hours for us to get information back from the lab. So we cannot close a beach until the next morning. But by that time the bacterial contamina-

tion may be gone," he explained.

"With real-time monitoring, we can make a decision that same afternoon to get people out of the water, or to re-open a beach sooner if everything's fine."

About three dozen health departments and other local agencies that usually receive state funding to monitor their beach waters for bacterial contamination won't get any money next year.

The DEQ gave top priority to areas with greatest need, according to the Associated Press. Counties without beach closures the previous five years were

first to lose out.

Among the 10 agencies besides Macomb's that were funded, grants included \$2,600 each for Alpena, Berrien, Chippewa, Monroe and Ottawa counties; \$5,200 each for Iosco, Schoolcraft and Wayne counties; \$10,400 for Arenac County; and \$13,000 for St. Clair County.

Margi Armstrong, Lake St. Clair coordinator for the environmental group Clean Water Action, said Gov. Rick Snyder should solve the problem by freeing up additional funds to assist the entire Great Lakes watershed.

Forlini said the DEQ

receives \$17 million in annual funding for surface water quality and he did not realize the Macomb County allocation would derive entirely from the small federal allocation for Michigan beach monitoring.

However, a successful DNA-based monitoring system could be duplicated in all Michigan lakefront counties, he added.

"We're all getting the \$100,000," said Forlini, who has thousands of constituents on the waterfront. "This isn't just about Macomb County. This is a chance to set up a lab so we all get real-time monitoring."