

## Cleaner beaches

Report card: Drought has helped lessen health risks to swimmers.

Urban runoff is once again showing itself to be the most insidious threat to the majority of beaches in California. The results from Heal the Bay's annual Summer Beach Report Card, released last week, show that when urban runoff stops or slows down, our beaches become surprisingly clean.

Drought conditions throughout the state last summer were a boon to beaches, including those in Long Beach. The dry weather sharply curtailed the amount of polluted runoff that normally flows through creeks, rivers and storm drains into the ocean. It is a particular problem for Long Beach, which sits at the mouth of the L.A. River.

Statewide the number of beaches that received very good or excellent grades increased by 6 percent from last summer. While dry weather is believed to be largely responsible, clean-water programs are also having an effect. Two notoriously polluted beaches improved sharply Surfrider Beach in Malibu and Avalon Beach on Catalina Island thanks to various cleanup projects (in Avalon's case, it was sewer system improvements).

Long Beach's grades improved from last summer, and jumped dramatically from summer 2000, a more typical weather year, when more than half of all city beaches earned C grades.

In the latest report card, the majority of Long Beach city beaches earned A grades, with a handful of B grades, one C (at the projection of 16th Place) and no Ds or Fs. (Lower grades indicate serious risks to swimmers.) Even the north side of Colorado Lagoon, which almost always gets an F on the report cards, improved to a C, thanks to the drier weather (the center and south areas frequented by swimmers got A's).

Ocean waters near Belmont Pier improved from Bs to A's from Summer 2001 to 2002, and the beach near Granada Avenue, which has fared poorly in recent years, went from a D to a B. Alamos Bay continued its storm-drain diversion success: It has received A or A-plus grades every year since its storm drain runoff was diverted to treatment facilities. Before that, Alamos Bay earned consistent Fs.

The formula for cleaner beaches is no secret. In a few places, notably Orange County, sewer spills are the main culprits behind bacterial warnings and beach closures. In most other places it's the steady flow of urban runoff, which takes contaminants from city streets and deposits them in the ocean, where they can sicken swimmers.

Cleaning up dry-weather runoff is not an insurmountable challenge, unlike rain- and storm-water runoff -- high volumes make it nearly impossible to treat. Dry-weather filters and storm-drain diversion systems have proved to be incredibly effective.

Mother nature gave beaches a break this summer, but droughts (thankfully) don't last forever. The challenge for future summers will be to stop as much, and more, urban runoff from polluting the beaches as the drought did this year.