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From the Los Angeles Times

Congress considers legislation for quicker testing of water pollution

A measure approved by the House would require the EPA to develop a system that would allow the public to be made aware of contamination within hours of sampling.

By Richard Simon

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Reporting from Washington — Under legislation making its way through Congress, beachgoers would find out sooner whether they should steer clear of the water.

A measure approved Wednesday on a voice vote by the House would require speedier testing for coastal pollution and fund projects to track down sources of contamination.

In California, the additional spending authorized by the bill would be welcome by cities that have cut back on beach monitoring because of the state's budget troubles, said Mark Gold, president of Heal the Bay, a Santa Monica-based environmental group.

Rep. John Boozman of Arkansas, top Republican on the House subcommittee on water resources and environment, said the measure would "help ensure that the public can get timely warnings of potential health hazards associated with a trip to the beach."

Congressional action came as the Natural Resources Defense Council reported that beach closings and advisories last year declined 10%. But that, the group said, most likely was because of dry conditions and decreased funding for water monitoring.

Beach closings and advisories, often the result of aging sewage and storm water systems, still exceeded 20,000 incidents nationwide last year -- the fourth highest number since 1990, the group reported.

The Clean Coastal Environment and Public Health Act passed Wednesday by the House would require the Environmental Protection Agency to develop a test by 2012 that would allow the public to be alerted to contamination within hours of sampling, reducing the risk of exposure to disease-causing pathogens. A similar bill has cleared a Senate committee.

Currently, tests take 18 hours or longer to produce results.

"You get information on Friday that tells you whether the beach was clean on Thursday," said Nancy Stoner, co-director of the Natural Resources Defense Council's water program.

Once a faster test is developed, Gold said, "you grab a sample at 7 in the morning, and then you can post warning signs on the beach by 11 to let the public know whether or not it's safe to swim."

The House bill would authorize $40 million a year for the program through 2014. The Senate bill would authorize $60 million annually through 2013. Even if a final bill passes, the money would have to be appropriated by Congress.

Lawmakers already have moved on a separate front to increase funding for clean-water projects, including those designed to prevent beach pollution. A House-approved bill would provide $2.3 billion for the Clean Water State Revolving Fund, which helps state and local agencies pay for projects such as upgrading aging sewage-treatment plants and preventing runoff of polluted water. A bill headed to the Senate would provide $2.1 billion. About $689 million was provided this year.

Lawmakers also are considering the Sewage Overflow Community Right-To-Know Act, which would require treatment plants to alert the public to sewer overflows.

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