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E. coli prompts call for swim alerts

Betsy Iler

Oct 21, 2021



A swim alert team and information dispersion procedure should be established at Lake Martin after elevated *E. coli* counts were discovered last weekend in the upper lake, said Lake Watch Lake Martin president Eric Reutebuch.

When water samples collected above Coley Creek measured more than 600 parts per 100

milliliters of water following heavy rains last week, Lake Watch partnered with Lake Martin Home Owners and Boat Owners Association to alert boaters via a letter to membership and social media posts, Reutebuch said. Notifications also were sent to Lake Martin Resource Association and to public authorities, including Alabama Department of Environmental Management, Tallapoosa County Department of Public Health and officials in Alexander City, Dadeville, New Site and Tallapoosa County, he added.

“We were grasping for what to do. There is no system in place to notify people, we didn’t feel like Lake Watch was authorized to release a public health announcement,” Reutebuch explained. “We do testing and advise public agencies. We send them our data and our recommendations, but we don’t feel like we are in a position to release public announcements.”

The contaminated samples were collected north of Coley Creek, Reutebuch said. Samples collected below the creek – and below Alexander City’s wastewater treatment plant – were well within ADEM’s specified safe range, under 235 ppm, he explained.

Test results from the water samples were available two days after the water was drawn, he said.

“That was the first time we got high levels of *E. coli* in the upper lake. We have had it in the creeks before but never in the main stem of the reservoir,” Reutebuch said.

The bacteria likely washed into the lake and its tributary creeks and streams during a heavy rain event associated with Hurricane Ida, which dropped in excess of 3 inches of rain throughout the watershed, Reutebuch surmised.

Additional samples have not been drawn above Coley Creek since the discovery was made, but samples collected below Coley Creek continue to test in the safe range, Reutebuch said.

“A couple of days after the high hit, we sampled again at Stow Ferry Road and did not get *E. coli*,” he said.

Stow Ferry Road is located approximately 600 feet south of Coley Creek.

Data compiled in the Environmental Protection Agency’s *Literature Review of Contaminants in Livestock and Poultry Manure and Implications for Water Quality*, published in 2013, indicates

the contaminants could survive in the upper reaches of the lake for 35 to 300 days, depending on exposure to sunshine, temperatures and other environmental conditions.

Auburn University's genetic testing of *E. coli* samples taken from Lake Martin indicate the bacteria originated from cattle, human and poultry sources, but additional testing is needed to identify the specific sources, Reutebuch explained. If and when those sources are identified, ADEM could take action in the development of plans to prevent the pollution from entering the lake.

In the meantime, Lake Watch is working on action strategies to continue monitoring of the lake's water and to develop an alert system for lake residents and visitors any time an area of the lake is contaminated with *E. coli* and unsafe for swimming. More than 20 area residents answered a recent appeal for water monitor volunteers. Reutebuch would like for the swim alert plan to include a dozen testing sites at popular swimming locations around the lake, with results posted or reported regularly through a variety of outlets, including *The Outlook*, lake stakeholder websites and blogs and on the swimmingguide.com app.

"The Coosa River has a very good program that we could look into," he suggested.

"We don't want to go around sending people into a panic, and we don't want to shut down farming, but we don't want to minimize the potential danger," he said. "This is Alabama's only Treasured Lake, and we don't want to tarnish that designation."

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