

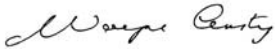


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Item No. 11.1.6

**Halifax Regional Council
July 7, 2009**

TO: Mayor Kelly and Members of Halifax Regional Council

SUBMITTED BY: 

Wayne Anstey, Acting Chief Administrative Officer

DATE: June 30, 2009

SUBJECT: Water Quality Testing Protocols

ORIGIN

Staff have initiated this report. Due to the public release of test results from two separate HRM water quality testing programs in 2008, considerable public confusion was created. Staff are seeking to minimize this for 2009.

RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that Regional Council halt the practice of issuing public notifications for the baseline water quality testing program.

BACKGROUND

The Municipality operates two water quality testing programs for two distinct purposes.

- HRM's supervised beaches are tested weekly throughout July and August to ensure safe water quality for swimming. This program tests for fecal coliform exclusively. When fecal coliform counts exceed acceptable standards the public is notified, the beach is temporarily closed, testing continues and the beach reopens when fecal coliform returns to acceptable levels.
- HRM also conducts water quality testing on more than 70 lakes in the region to monitor long term environmental trends resulting from development (e.g., eutrophication and sedimentation etc.). One sample is taken three times a year (spring, summer and fall). A much wider range of variables are tested, including fecal coliform. Fecal coliform however is not measured for the purposes of determining whether or not there is an immediate public health concern and the samples are not taken at HRM's supervised beaches. This data is intended to inform future policy and regulatory decisions.

In addition to the regular public notification protocol for high fecal coliform levels at Municipal beaches, Council directed staff to notify the public any time high fecal coliform results are found in the base line water quality testing program. Announcing the results of both programs has caused public confusion.

DISCUSSION

Announcing the fecal coliform results from both testing programs caused public confusion for a number of reasons.

- Testing at the supervised beaches provides immediate feedback on water quality and public safety. This is because the testing is carried out weekly, there are limited number of samples and the samples are only tested for one variable. This is the most reliable information for public safety.
- In the case of the baseline testing program, there is a 1-2 month delay between the time a sample is taken and when the results are available because there are many more samples and they are being tested for many more variables. As a result, this is not a reliable or timely source of data for public notifications.

The baseline water quality testing is also done on lakes which do not have a Municipal beach and weekly water testing program. Some of these lakes have a large number of organized and unorganized water sport activities (e.g., paddling, wind surfing, water skiing etc.). Announcing the results of the baseline water testing program caused confusion on these lakes also, because once put on notice, the public expects updated results and notification. Since the lakes are only tested once a summer, no updated results are available during the remainder of the summer to indicate if the

situation has been rectified. In addition, one test sample on a very large lake is not a reliable means of determining if the entire lake is safe or not. The tests at Municipal beaches for example are taken at the beaches and are only intended to determine water quality in that specific location, not the entire lake.

Due to the public confusion created, staff recommends that public notification of the baseline test results be discontinued. The results will still be available on HRM's website <http://www.halifax.ca/environment/lakesanddrivers.html>. The data is also available from the Sustainable Environment Management Office. This allows the data to be publically accessible without causing public confusion.

Council may also wish to have water quality testing programs on the list for review through the new Service Review Process.

ALTERNATIVES:

Regional Council could choose to continue to publicize the baseline testing results. This is not recommended due the amount of public confusion resulting from the released data.

BUDGET IMPLICATIONS:

None at this time.

FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT POLICIES / BUSINESS PLAN


This report complies with the Municipality's Multi-Year Financial Strategy, the approved Operating, Capital and Reserve budgets, policies and procedures regarding withdrawals from the utilization of Capital and Operating reserves, as well as any relevant legislation.


ATTACHMENTS

None

A copy of this report can be obtained online at <http://www.halifax.ca/council/agendasc/cagenda.html> then choose the appropriate meeting date, or by contacting the Office of the Municipal Clerk at 490-4210, or Fax 490-4208.

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