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## Waterfront canals are part of total water quality effort

Published: Tuesday, August 12, 2008 at 1:00 a.m.

Last Modified: Monday, August 11, 2008 at 6:20 p.m.

In Kim Hackett's Aug. 4 article "She wants some clarity," a resident characterized the water behind her Siesta Key home as severely polluted, based on private lab results, and questioned why crab and fish populations were declining in the key's Grand Canal.



We know from countywide surface water sampling that bacteria levels rise and fall under different conditions, and that they can be higher when heavy rains force polluted surface water into waterways. It is inaccurate to characterize the canals as safe or unsafe based on one sample, because the bacteria levels that this resident reported to Sarasota County -- enterococci 200 mg/L and fecal coliform 80 mg/L -- are actually quite low.

The Florida surface-water quality standard for one sample of fecal coliform bacteria is 800 mg/L. There is no state standard for enterococcus, although the Department of Health standard for designated swimming areas is 105 col/ 100mL.

Dead-end, box-cut canals are not designated swimming areas. They were designed to provide waterfront property and access to navigable waterways, not the necessary flushing that supports natural ecosystems. Canals are subject to pollutants in road and property runoff, including oils, pesticides, fertilizers, herbicides and bird, wildlife and pet waste. A lack of storm-water treatment systems on Siesta Key is responsible for direct storm-water discharge into its canals, Sarasota Bay and the Gulf.

Because these canals were constructed above the mean high water level, they offer little intertidal (bottom exposed during low tide) habitat at all. Intertidal habitats host barnacles, clams, snails, sea urchins, filter-feeding worms and macroalgae that provide an essential food source to birds, fish, stingrays and other animals. Canals also accumulate sediment that can thicken and combine with decaying organic matter to create anoxic (oxygen-depleted) bottom conditions that are unfavorable to inhabitation. Without an appropriate food source, fish and crabs will seek favorable habitat elsewhere.

Declining fish and crab populations may also be attributed to human population growth and overfishing.

Sarasota County places a high priority on the quality of all its surface waters, whether they provide drinking water, recreational use or valuable wildlife habitat. Our water-quality monitoring program extends through coastal basins from north Sarasota to Englewood, and it provides an excellent overview of water quality throughout the county. One of those stations monitors the Grand Canal, and has reported very positive results. Out of 28 monthly samples taken from Grand Canal since March 2006, 89 percent were well below Florida surface-water quality standards for fecal coliform bacteria. Only three exceeded the standard, and those samples followed significant rainfall events.

The good news is that citizens and county government are working together to reduce pollution. In addition to the water quality testing, Sarasota County is developing a Watershed Management Plan for Roberts Bay that should improve water quality in both the bay and Siesta Key's Grand Canal. Our Neighborhood Environmental Stewardship Team works with the community to improve water quality in other areas.

Waterfront property owners can do much to improve the quality of canals by minimizing the pollutants that enter them from their own properties: Plant vegetated buffer zones along seawalls to slow down and filter direct runoff. Install rain barrels to retain runoff and water plants. Install rain gardens and swales to filter direct runoff. Use pervious (porous) materials for driveways and walkways. Maintain a 10- foot, non-fertilized buffer along sea walls. Limit the use of pesticides and herbicides, and remove pet waste from lawns. Provide habitat by planting mangroves along riprap where possible or installing reef balls along sea walls and under docks.

The Sarasota Bay Estuary Program offers a valuable resource for restoration opportunities. To find out more, visit [www.sarasotabay.org](http://www.sarasotabay.org). Other information for waterfront residents is at [www.scgov.net](http://www.scgov.net).

Jack Merriam is the manager of Sarasota County Water Resources.

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