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Coliform found in creeks

Tests show levels in parts of Bushkill, Little Bushkill exceed safe levels.

By Andrew McGill, OF THE MORNING CALL

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Christopher Noll, sewage enforcement officer in Plainfield Township, conducts a dye test on field water. Noll is looking for the source of fecal contaminants that are seeping into Little Bushkill Creek. (KEVIN MINGORA, THE MORNING CALL / July 19, 2010)

Teresa Wenner's portion of the Little Bushkill Creek has always bubbled clean and pure through her backyard. Fishermen regularly cast lines for trout from a bridge just below her Plainfield Township property, and the creek is noted statewide for its clear waters.

So Wenner was surprised when the stretch of stream behind her house tested positive for fecal

contaminants — at a level six times the safe limit for swimming.

Using data collected by local volunteers, the state Department of Environmental Protection says five out of six test sites along the Bushkill and its tributaries have registered excessive levels of fecal coliform, a bacteria found in human and animal waste.

Now, DEP officials are working with municipal sewage officers to track down the source, which could be as big as a malfunctioning treatment plant or as small as a poorly irrigated cow field.

"There is something going on," DEP spokesman Mark Carmon said. "You look at numbers like that, and you have to wonder."

State guidelines deem a fecal coliform concentration of 200 parts per 100 milliliters safe for human contact such as through swimming or fishing. According to multiple tests conducted in May and June by the Bushkill Stream Conservancy, a stretch near Wenner's property registered an average concentration of 1,360.

It's the same story at the Bushkill Creek below Lafayette College in Easton, which tallied 1,170. Three other locations also came in high: the stretch of the Bushkill by Forks Township's Lions Park, with a reading of 279; the Little Bushkill Creek just before it empties into its bigger brother in Stockertown, at 607; and another site in Plainfield Township, at 938.

Only a testing site underneath Route 33 near the Stockertown exit tested clean, hitting a passing grade of 119.

"We feel this is raising questions," Conservancy President Kate Brandes said. "All of the water quality there is affecting the main stem. The people in there, they expect their streams to be clean."

Conservancy members are concerned that persistent levels could prompt state officials to downgrade the creek's quality rating, or that the multiplying bacteria could eventually gobble up oxygen and diminish trout stocks.

And there's a real possibility of more dangerous contaminants — ones not so easily detected — tagging along for the ride, said Moravian College biology professor Frank Kuserk.

"It's generally a warning sign that there might be other potential human pathogens in the waterways," he said. "There are some strains of *E. coli* that are pathogenic ... other human pathogens that are much more difficult to test for in waters, just because they may be there in smaller numbers."

Plainfield Township residents asked township supervisors last week if they planned to post signs warning people about the levels. That's a state decision, they replied, and DEP officials are waiting on the next round of Conservancy testing in August before making any moves.

The Conservancy, a partnership of public and private entities interested in protecting the Bushkill,

has long worked with the DEP, fielding teams of volunteers to monitor area waterways. Trained in proper collection methods, they have the trust of state regulators, who call the group their "early-warning system."

But even after you've found them, getting the rod-shaped bacteria out of streams is difficult, Carmon said — you can't just add chlorine like in a swimming pool. Instead, state and municipal officials are focusing on rooting out the cause of contamination itself, which could be as innocuous as a single faulty septic system.

In Plainfield Township, sewage enforcement officer Chris Noll is starting at the Rasleytown Bridge and moving north, pouring dye into sewage systems and seeing if it shows up in the creek. In Easton, city Planning Director Becky Bradley said she's waiting on DEP guidance before acting.

Conservancy members say the fact that coliform levels decline along the Bushkill and spike again in Easton could indicate a separate source of contamination around the city. It's also possible that recent rain may have washed contaminants into the creek and temporarily bumped up coliform levels.

But in Plainfield, Wenner knows something is wrong. Private tests she commissioned for the segment behind her house have shown concentrations of more than 6,000 coliforms per 100 milliliters, though those numbers haven't been vetted by DEP. Something needs to be done, she said.

"It shows that it definitely is a problem," she said.

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