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Group nurses ailing Dickinson Bayou

[By Mark Collette](#)

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DICKINSON — The turtles and the cows that turned up dead in Dickinson Bayou didn't suffer from low oxygen levels in the water, as the dead fish did.

The turtles and the cows either got stuck and drowned or had infections, said Jan Culbertson in the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department's Dickinson Marine Lab.

"Right before Easter, I witnessed three fathers in a ski boat that were placing their small children in the water to test out new jet skis right by the sewage treatment plant," Culbertson noted in an e-mail. "I told the fathers that it was not a good idea to

get their children in the water right after a flood due to all the fecal (bacteria) in the water, plus we had two dead cows still in the bayou.”

The watershed is ill, or “impaired” in governmental speak, and it isn’t just the people in Dickinson who should be worried, environmental officials said.

The watershed is the entire area that drains into the bayou and eventually into Galveston Bay.

It covers about 100 square miles, including Manville, Friendswood, League City, Kemah, Texas City, Hitchcock, Santa Fe and Alvin, said Bud Solmonsson, watershed program manager for the Texas Cooperative Extension.

Environmentalists are especially concerned because of rapid development on Galveston County’s mainland. New roads prevent water from saturating the ground, and more runoff ends up in a bayou already prone to flooding because of its flat topography.

“People don’t realize when they wash their cars and let their pets defecate on grasses and things like that, that when there’s a storm, it just runs down the drain and into the bayou,” Solmonsson said.

Elevated bacteria levels likely stem from municipal water collection overflows, failing septic systems, pet waste, naturally occurring wildlife and ranches that raise large animals, according to researchers at Texas A&M University in Galveston. Fertilizers can contribute to nutrient imbalances in the water.

Culbertson said there are no warnings posted at the Dickinson boat ramp.

The Galveston County Health Department, which monitors coastal water for bacteria and posts signs on beaches as part of a federally funded program, does some monitoring of the bayou along with other agencies.

“We always want people to be aware that any time you get in untreated water for swimming, you need to be cautious ... particularly if you have open cuts or you receive a cut while you’re swimming,” said health district spokesman Kurt Koopmann.

Monitoring all waters and posting signs at recreational areas throughout the county could present funding and logistical challenges, said Ron Schultz, director of environmental health programs for the district.

The county’s monitoring of Dickinson Bayou focuses mostly on identifying sources of harmful discharges.

A year ago, state and federal agencies formed the Dickinson Bayou Watershed Partnership in cooperation with local stakeholders such as cities and businesses.

On Thursday, they'll present their findings on the state of the watershed at a public meeting in Dickinson.

Solmonsson and Culbertson said public awareness and input is crucial.

Nearly everything that happens in the watershed, from farming to construction, affects the bayou, Solmonsson said.

Beyond problems with bacteria and oxygen levels, Culbertson said the bayou also suffers from excessive debris due to flooding, making it even more hazardous for swimmers and boaters.

Solmonsson said it's questionable whether there should be warnings posted along the bayou.

"I'd think twice about it," he said when asked about letting children swim. "Where it's closer to the bay, more tidal, it might be better. Where it's stagnant, it might not be."

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How to Help: To get involved, attend Thursday's public forum, 5:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. at Hughes Road Elementary School, 11901 Hughes Road in Dickinson, or visit www.dickinsonbayou.org.