

# Lahontan disagrees with EPA bacteria standards

By Kathryn Reed

California is looking at creating a one-size-fits-all approach to handling bacteria in the state's water bodies.

Lahontan Regional Water Quality Control Board isn't sure that is the correct approach because it would make the rules the same for the ocean, Lake Tahoe and lakes in Desolation Wilderness.

Lauri Kemper, assistant executive director for Lahontan, spoke at this month's Tahoe Area Sierra Club about bacteria standards and protecting recreation uses.



Lauri Kemper with Lahontan talks about bacteria regulations. Photo/LTN

"We believe in diversity because we have a diverse region," she told the group. Much of the water in Lahontan's jurisdiction is used for drinking, except for Mono Lake.

The EPA set the national standard for fecal coliform in water at 200 fecal coliform per 100 milliliters. That is the amount deemed safe to swim in. Lahontan's standard is 20fc/100ml.

“Fecal coliform is an indicator of bacteria and sometimes that something more harmful is present,” Kemper said. “When fecal coliform is in the water it doesn’t necessarily mean it will cause you harm.”

She gave the example of how people may get ill drinking water in another country, but the locals are just fine. It proves “tainted” water takes some getting used to and won’t harm everyone.

Kemper said the reason bacteria standards are being looked it is because it’s an easy way to test for E. coli. Since 2008 Lahontan has been taking E. coli and fecal coliform samples.

“We are seeing a connection between the two,” she said.

The highest concentrations are found where there is grazing. This is in part why Lahontan told the U.S. Forest Service that grazing in Big and Meiss meadows was no longer allowed.

Lahontan is worried that if the state adopts a policy that is less restrictive than what is in place, that grazing could return and tributaries of Lake Tahoe could be negatively impacted.

The EPA is recommending the State Water Board allow 126 E. coli per 100 milliliters. The risk is 35 illnesses per 1,000 swimmers.

Lahontan prefers E. coli limits of 17 per 100 milliliters so the risk of illness is 35 out of every 100,000 swimmers.

“The EPA standard is just swimming, but we have people drinking it,” Kemper said.

Several water purveyors on the Nevada side use Lake Tahoe for drinking water. A filter or chlorine is used as a disinfectant. Beyond that it is not treated because Tahoe’s water is so pristine.

The cabins at Echo Lake rely on springs for their water. It is not treated.

The State Water Board will be conducting scoping on the standards in April. But the listening sessions are by invite only. Public comment and workshops are likely to take place next winter.