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First flush of 2025 sent bacteria levels soaring along Coastside waterways

By Ashton J. Hacke
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The first major storm of the 2025 water year flushed high levels of bacteria into creeks and coastal waters along the Coastside, according to a new report from the San Mateo Resource Conservation District.

Samples collected from 16 sites along the Coastside during the first major storm of 2025 on Oct. 13 showed enterococci—bacteria that indicates fecal contamination—exceeded state water quality standards at all locations.

At several Coastside sites, those exceedances were stark, including more than 220 times the state standard at Frenchman's Creek, Surfer's South Outfall and El Granada Outfall, about 40 times at Tunitas Creek, roughly seven times at the San Pedro Creek mouth and about three times at Montara Creek.

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The findings reflect a "snapshot" of peak runoff conditions during the first major storm of the season and do not represent year-round water quality. Even so, bacteria levels still exceeded state standards at most sites, with stormwater runoff identified as a primary driver of coastal pollution.

"Notably, E. coli results in 2025 included more samples below the WQO than observed in prior years, representing a modest positive departure from long-term patterns. In contrast, enterococci concentrations remain elevated across nearly all sites and years, reinforcing the need for continued public health messaging related to post-storm water contact recreation," the report states.

Beyond fecal bacteria, most other pollutants did not show widespread concerns. Nitrate and lead levels remained low across all locations, while metals such as copper and zinc showed recurring issues at a handful of sites, including West Point Ditch and Vassar Outfall.

Sediment levels also remained low overall, with just one exceedance recorded in 2025 at Surfer's South Outfall. The conservation district said the spike was not believed to be related to the Surfer's Beach sand replenishment project.

Bacterial issues along the Coastside are not new. Linda Mar Beach in Pacifica has repeatedly appeared on state and national water quality rankings, including Heal the Bay's "Beach Bummer" list and the Surfrider Foundation's "Clean Water Report."

The beach's failing grades are largely attributed to San Pedro Creek, which carries bacteria into the ocean at the southern end of the beach. The city of Pacifica is working to address the issue under a state mandate to reduce bacteria levels by 2028. However, years of monitoring and infrastructure upgrades have yet to resolve the problem.

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Similar concerns have surfaced farther south at Pillar Point Harbor, where the San Mateo County Harbor District is working to reduce bacteria levels under a total maximum daily load program established by the San Francisco Bay Regional Water Quality Control Board and the EPA. The First Flush report shows several outfalls into the harbor recorded high levels of bacteria during the Oct. 13 storm.

The Harbor District is reviewing potential solutions, including installing filtration systems and rerouting Deer Creek to discharge at the existing stormwater outfall at Surfer's Beach instead of into the harbor.

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After graduating from Half Moon Bay High School, Hacke spent several years reporting on abortion rights and local politics in Wyoming while also working as a freelance photojournalist for newsrooms throughout the state. Hacke returned to the coast after earning a bachelor's degree in journalism from the University of Wyoming. He covers politics and culture in Half Moon Bay.

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