

2024.05.21

Deputy M. Tadier of the Minister for the Environment regarding the reported presence of E-Coli bacteria found in the water at Grève de Lecq. (OQ.93/2024)

Further to the reported presence of E. coli bacteria found in the water at Grève de Lecq, will the Minister provide the Assembly with an update and advise whether the cause has been established; whether any responsible parties will be held accountable; and, if so, how this will be achieved?

Deputy S.G. Luce of Grouville and St. Martin (The Minister for the Environment):

It will not be a surprise to the Deputy and to Members to know that the regulation directorate in my department have undertaken and started a full investigation into this incident. I have to say to Members that that investigation is still ongoing. So providing further information at this stage is difficult. But I can say and advise that the cause has not yet been established and therefore the responsible parties cannot be held accountable. But as an update, I can give Members a very hot-off-the-press, and literally in the last few minutes, the results of yesterday's standard seawater testing which happens on a weekly basis. But before I do that, I would just say last Monday the level taken in the sea at Grève de Lecq was 3,300 C.F.U. (colony-forming unit) per 100 ml. Last Wednesday it was 1,800, but the figure taken yesterday, and as I said, has come to me just in these last few minutes, is 780. Anything under 500 is regarded as good, so the message and update to Members this morning is things are improving. There is still work to do, and once the full investigation has been completed we will know more about the source.

3.6.1 Deputy M. Tadier:

Has the Minister been in conversation with the Minister for Sustainable Economic Development about the potential impact or the real impact that this might be having on the tourism sector and the confidence in that.

Deputy S.G. Luce:

I do not need to be in contact with the Minister for Sustainable Economic Development to know the impact. It is a great disappointment to me personally - and I am sure to everybody - that we have these incidents on our beaches. Any adverse publicity of this nature is never great. We monitor 16 beaches across the Island on a weekly basis from May until the end of September. Generally, Grève de Lecq being a typical example, it is excellent and it is good that we test regularly because we do pick up on these sorts of incidents and we can then act on them. But yes, I fully understand the implications, not only on tourists, but the very large number of locals who swim on a regular basis all the way through the year.

3.6.2 Deputy J. Renouf:

Is the Minister able to at least give us a little information about the cause of the incident, in the sense that is he able to say whether it is likely that it comes from the stream coming in or is it likely to have been a source from at sea, if you like?

Deputy S.G. Luce:

I cannot obviously say anything specifically, but I think it will be quite obvious to most Members that the stream which goes on to the beach at Grève de Lecq is the most likely cause. I cannot say definitively that it is, but we know we have mains drains in the area, there is a pumping station at Grève de Lecq, we also have a number of properties in the vicinity which will rely on boreholes and septic tanks and soakaways. All will be investigated. I can assure Members of that and I can only come back to the Assembly with results once the investigation is completed.

3.6.3 Deputy J. Renouf:

I wonder if the Minister has given consideration to whether the testing of beaches should be done all year round, given the rise of all-year swimming, but also in the case of Grève de Lecq, it is used as a winter surfing location - not least by my own son - and whether the time is now right to consider extending those tests through the year.

Deputy S.G. Luce:

I will certainly consider it. It did occur to me as I was making my answer a couple of minutes ago about the number of Islanders that, since COVID, have taken up sea swimming on a daily basis 12 months of the year, and the fact that we only start monitoring our bathing water in May and conclude that in September. I take the point of the Deputy on board and I will certainly consider it.

3.6.4 Deputy L.K.F. Stephenson:

Can the Minister confirm that the test which did show the very high levels last week was the first one taken this season at Grève de Lecq? Therefore, does he accept that the levels could have been high for some time, especially as we now know that local residents have been reporting foul smells from the stream for a number of weeks.

Deputy S.G. Luce:

I can confirm that last Monday's test was the first of our weekly tests this year and, as I said, those will continue until the end of September. It is quite possible, as the Deputy says, that these levels may have been high. I was not aware of complaints from members of the public until this incident came to light, but she makes a good point. It is possible, and obviously hindsight is a wonderful thing, but given my last answer to the Deputy, we may well have to consider testing on a more regular basis.

3.6.5 Deputy L.K.F. Stephenson:

I was going to ask the same question that Deputy Renouf has, so I am glad that has been answered. Will the Minister commit to going away and perhaps trying to find out why the complaints of residents about the smell perhaps had not been looked into when perhaps they should have been? Especially given that testing was not that far away either.

Deputy S.G. Luce:

I will commit to do that. I am not aware or sure of which department was informed or whether it was just locals chatting among themselves, but if people were informed I will find out who was informed and why action was not taken sooner.

3.6.6 Deputy D.J. Warr of St. Helier South:

Can the Minister confirm that it is safe now for residents of the Island to swim in Grève de Lecq Bay?

Deputy S.G. Luce:

I am not sure if I am going to go as far as to say that it is safe because, of course, the test that was taken and the results I have just read ... the test was taken yesterday and something may have happened overnight or even this morning to say that swimming in Grève de Lecq may not be. It may be even better. I cannot give the Deputy that assurance. All I can say is that to qualify as an excellent water sample, it needs to be below 250; to qualify as good it needs to be below 500; and poor results are classified as over 500. Yesterday's sample at Grève de Lecq was 718 so, while it is poor, I can say that last week's results also had poor results in La Haule and Victoria Pool. Rozel was good; all the other beaches around the Island were excellent. But we do have occasional blips and that is usually caused by excess rain and runoff from fields and leakages from soakaways.

3.6.7 Deputy M. Tadier:

My question about who will be held accountable has not really been answered, but I would like to use my final supplementary to ask about the efficacy of testing more generally, given the fact that in Jersey our seawater gets changed twice a day, and that is not by the Minister, but by the tides. The fact that we have got any poor water in Jersey, I think, is shameful. Does he think that it would be more effective to test the water going into the sea, i.e. the streams and here, which I think is effectively a sewage outlet - it has become that anyway - because that is where the issue is, not the seawater coming in from the Channel.

Deputy S.G. Luce:

I can assure the Deputy that not only is bathing water tested on a regular basis, but streams, reservoirs, public water supplies are tested even more frequently and more religiously. But he has a good point. It may well be that streams entering bays where people swim could be tested more frequently. I imagine that they are; I cannot say definitively, but I imagine that they already are. There is also the case that some of these bays which are tested will not have streams entering them, Archirondel for example being one, Anne Port being another. But I will take his point on board and ask the question.