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Michael Levenson - Globe Staff | May 30, 2017

Last year's drought had an upside: cleaner beaches in Boston



Frankie Harvey, 3, of Framingham, bravely ran into the cold water at a South Boston beach May 17.

Last year's drought killed crops, parched lawns, and stressed municipal water systems. But it did have an upside, at least for beach bums.

The ocean off Boston-area beaches was unusually pristine last summer, confirming that many have long since shed their reputation as catch basins for cigarette butts and sludge.

Water quality testing on 15 public beaches in 10 communities from Lynn to Hull showed that, on average, the ocean was safe for swimming 96 percent of the time, up from 92 percent in 2015, according to a report by Save the Harbor/Save the Bay, a nonprofit advocacy group.

Bruce Berman, the group's spokesman, attributed the uptick

in cleanliness to the lack of rain last summer, which meant that there was less stormwater and sewage runoff flushing bacteria and contaminants into the ocean.

"While the drought was bad news for farmers, fields, and forests, it was pretty good news for water quality on the region's public beaches," Berman said Tuesday.

Overall, he credited the strong results to the cleanup of Boston Harbor, a decades-long project that Save the Harbor/Save the Bay strongly supported. For years, the harbor was a national punchline, branded "the filthiest harbor in America" by Vice President George H.W. Bush during his 1988 campaign against Governor Michael S.

Dukakis.

Acting on a judge's orders, the government spent more than \$4 billion to modernize the Deer Island sewage treatment plant in the 1990s, and also built a 9.5-mile tunnel that carries treated sewage away from the shore and discharges it into the deep waters of Massachusetts Bay.

As a result, water quality across the region has improved dramatically and given some beaches bragging rights. Last summer, Winthrop Beach in Winthrop, Savin Hill in Dorchester, Nantasket in Hull, and City Point, M Street, and Carson in South Boston aced all of their bacteria tests and were clean 100 percent of the time, the report showed.

"Now, we're proud to say we have the cleanest urban beaches in the nation," Berman said.

Still, there were a few notable blots on the group's annual water quality report card.

King's Beach, which straddles Lynn and Swampscott, was clean just 83 percent of the time, making it the dirtiest of the 15 beaches tested. Short Beach in Winthrop was the second dirtiest, passing 88 percent of its water quality tests. Tenean Beach in Dorchester passed 92 percent of its water quality tests, ranking it third from the bottom.

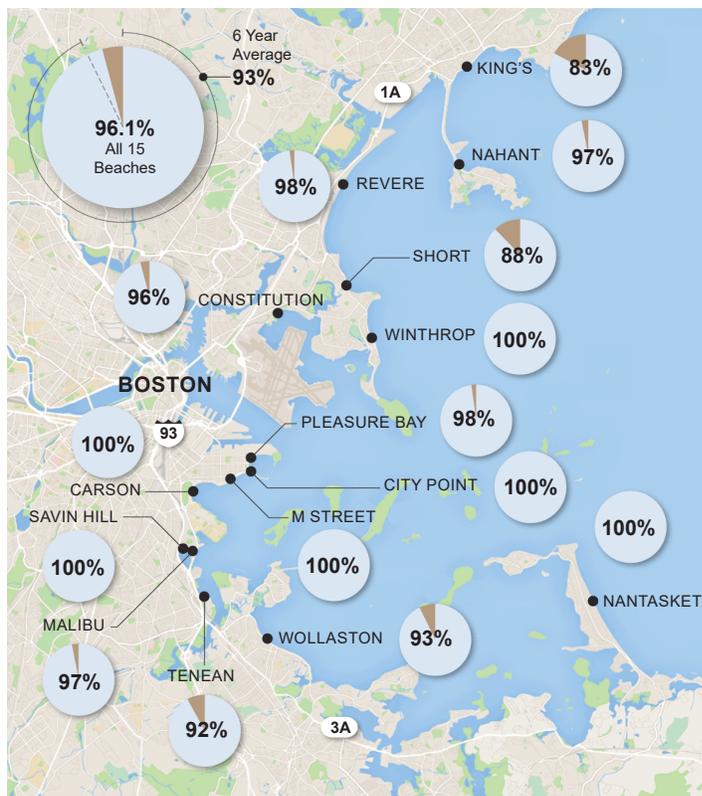
Berman pointed to six-year averages showing that Short Beach is usually cleaner, and



The report found that Nantasket Beach in Hull was clean 100 percent of the time.

Clean beaches

How often area public beaches were safe for swimming in 2016.



SOURCE: Save the Harbor, Save the Bay
James Abundis / Globe Staff

said the beach just “caught a bad break” when it was tested last year after a rainstorm. But King’s Beach and Tenean, he said, are almost always ranked last, underscoring the need to fix leaky pipes and upgrade storm systems that leach pollutants and bacteria into those urban summer havens.

“It’s a phenomenal turnaround; we really did spend a lot of time in the ’90s getting Boston Harbor cleaned up,” said Judith Pederson, a Massachusetts Institute of Technology research affiliate and co-chairwoman of Save the Harbor/Save the Bay’s science advisory committee. “What people forget is the streams that empty into the harbor still have a lot of pollution, and that’s what’s coming into the beaches, and that’s what needs to be tackled.”

Later this year, Pederson’s committee will issue a report on King’s and Tenean beaches. Save the Harbor/Save the Bay hopes the results will encourage the state to help cities and towns pay for improvements needed to stop stormwater and sewage runoff.

“It’s not hard. We know what the answer is. It’s where do you put your priorities and funding,” Pederson said. “And these days, it’s really uncertain whether there’s going to be money for water quality issues like this that really benefit a lot of people.”

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