



# Bird poop likely closing beaches

*Research points  
to geese and gulls,  
not municipal waste*

**BY ERIC MCGUINNESS**

Blame the Canada geese and gulls when you and your kids can't swim at Bayfront or Pier 4 parks.

Environment Canada biologist Jacqui Milne says new evidence supports a theory that bird poop is the prime source of *E. coli* bacteria that closes beaches.

Results reported by Milne and other scientists at the 41st Central Canadian Symposium on Water Quality Research, in Burlington, suggest bacteria from bird droppings may live for a long time in wet beach sand on Great Lakes shorelines, contaminating the shallow water used by bathers.

Milne said it appears treated waste from the four Hamilton and Halton sewage plants emptying into Hamilton harbour is not the prime source of beach pollution, although raw sewage overflows from the city's combined storm and sanitary sewer system cause big spikes in *E. coli* levels after heavy storms.

Prompted by earlier indications that birds were a big factor in keeping bayfront beaches closed most of the season, Hamilton installed a fence at Pier 4 last August to keep geese from walking onto the beach and a line of floating buoys to stop them swimming ashore.



HAMILTON SPECTATOR FILE PHOTO

**Scientist Allan Crowe says beach pollution is studied because, 'it's a problem on all beaches on the Great Lakes.'**

Milne said there was no immediate effect, but more time is needed to see if those efforts help. There are also plans to add overhead wires to deter flying gulls and geese next summer, a method that produced good results at the Kelso Conservation Area in Milton.

Allan Crowe, who like Milne works for the National Water Research Institute at the Canada Centre for Inland Waters, said beach pollution is being studied because, "it's a problem on all beaches on the Great Lakes. Hardly a day goes by it doesn't make news."

Milne noted one of the prime goals of the Hamilton Harbour Remedial Action Plan is to make the water safe for swimming most of the time.

Crowe said scientists don't know for sure how bacteria get to the beaches and survive, but research in Tiny Township on Georgian Bay ruled out seepage from beachfront cottage septic systems as well as seepage into small creeks flowing into Lake Huron.

Recent findings there also point to bird droppings, especially where natural dunes have been eroded or bull-

dozed, leaving beaches that remain wet, allowing bacteria from droppings to spread down from the surface. He said *E. coli* levels were high in the so-called swash zone where waves run up on the beach. Tanya Kon of the University of Guelph said her studies along Lake Huron suggest a relationship between algae and *E. coli*. Bacteria may reproduce on the algae, surviving a long time on algae mixed with sand.

*emcguinness@thespec.com*  
905-526-4650