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For more information, contact:
John Cassani, Calusa Waterkeeper,
239-633-7274
Cassani@CalusaWaterkeeper.org
www.CalusaWaterkeeper.org

Fort Myers City Council to Discuss Bacterial Contamination of Billy’s Creek

FORT MYERS - April 12, 2018 - Fecal bacteria levels in Billy’s Creek pose an extremely serious public health risk. The enterococci bacteria can cause gastrointestinal illness, infections and rashes.

The Florida Department of Health (FDOH) calls for beach closure when enterococci levels reach a threshold of 71 per 100 milliliters of water (cfu or MPN/100 ml) and the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP) sets its threshold level at a monthly average of 35 with no more than 10 percent of samples exceeding 130. Calusa Waterkeeper has documented levels as high as 4840 cfu/100 ml as recently as March 7. This is 68 times higher than the FDOH threshold level of 71. Since 2001 enterococci levels in Billy’s Creek have been above the FDOH threshold of 71 more than 97 percent of the time.

Calusa Waterkeeper notified the Fort Myers City Council, Lee County Commission, FDEP and FDOH last January of this threat after our initial review of government records indicated elevated levels dating back to 2001. Yet the various government agencies have failed to effectively notify the public of the serious health risk.

The Fort Myers Public Information Officer indicated to WINK News that the Creek is "safe" for recreation. It is not safe for children and others who may wade or swim in the Creek. One, “no swimming” sign over the five-mile length of the Creek is inadequate. Enterococci levels are so high at times that the creek may not be safe for indirect contact that canoeists and kayakers may experience. Billy’s Creek is a part of the Great Calusa Blueway designated as a paddling trail by the Lee County Visitor and Convention Bureau (VCB). The VCB lists points of interest on Billy’s Creek including Shady Oaks Park and the Billy’s Creek Filter Marsh.

The Calusa Waterkeeper will discuss the Billy’s Creek contamination at the Fort Myers City Council meeting on Monday, April 16th starting at 4:30 pm in City Hall. Calusa Waterkeeper strongly encourages the public to attend this meeting and voice your concerns. If you cannot attend, please call or write your City Council Member and County Commissioner.

Calusa Waterkeeper calls on state and local officials to:

1. Post adequate public notice, including signage, that indicates all appropriate recreational concerns and risks (swimming, wading, boating) and why.

2. Increase the frequency of sampling per the Florida Administrative Code, Chapter 62-302.530 (minimum 10 samples per month for calculating a geometric mean).

3. Conduct enteric bacteria tracing to determine the source of contamination (human vs. animal) and to guide remediation.

4. Develop a restoration plan with appropriate timelines.