

Canoe championship on as bacteria levels return to 'normal' in Keehi Lagoon

By [Alex Cerball](#), [Alexander Zannes](#) and [Web Staff](#)

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The Hawaii Department of Health says the water quality at Keehi Lagoon has improved tremendously since Tropical Storm Darby, though bacteria levels are still high.

Health officials say while they're not closing the lagoon for recreational use, people are urged to use caution in and around the water.

"We received the test results from samples collected yesterday. They've gone up a bit, but basically we're comfortable that the bacterial levels are back to their what we call normal levels," said Stuart Yamada, Department of Health, Environmental Management Division. "They're still in excess of the recreational water quality standard, but nevertheless we consider this normal conditions."

Yamada said Wednesday that levels had dropped an "astronomical" 95 percent.

Several canoe clubs pull out of state championship, but decision 'not made lightly'

The Hawaiian Canoe Racing Association's state championship at Keehi Lagoon was previously in limbo as the lagoon had been under a brown water advisory since Darby.

Organizers confirm the race is still on this weekend, but several canoe clubs tell KHON2 they've decided not to compete.

There were plenty of canoes in the water just off Sand Island Thursday, but for some, the practice went from being a warm-up for Saturday's championship race to simply another evening on the water.

Cam Cavasso explained his club, New Hope Canoe Club, was among those deciding not to race this weekend. "Contamination is still on the water. It's dangerous for people. It could make somebody real sick. We felt it wasn't wise to compete," he said.

Outrigger Canoe Club, which has approximately 180 paddlers in 30 crews in kids, men, women, and masters divisions, will also be absent. Spokesman Fred Noa says "the decision was not made lightly" and knows paddlers are disappointed.

"It's been a solid season for the paddling crew and program and we want the club season to end on a good note and not be a story about one of our paddlers contracting a serious infection competing in ill-advised conditions, and that's really what it came down to," he told KHON2. "Obviously there's some disappointment. You work hard all

summer to get ready for the states, so I'm sure there's some disappointment. But the risk of one of our paddlers getting sick really outweighed our willingness to participate this weekend."

For the teams that will compete, HCRA says it's going to advise paddlers to know the risks before entering the water. It will also take precautions such as not allowing boat holders in the water, making sure paddlers don't stay in the water longer than they have to, and providing foot washing stations and a first aid tent.

Walter Vierra of HCRA saying he wants paddlers to stay safe: "We remind all of the participants that participation is voluntary and it's up to them to make the decision on an individual basis of whether or not they want to participate in the race or not."

Permanent warning signs

Warning signs have been posted to notify users of the health risk, and Yamada says they'll become a permanent fixture at the lagoon as bacteria levels there are typically high.

"Let's face it. Keehi Lagoon is an urban drainage way," he said. "We're not trying to poke fun of it, but it was never meant to be pristine water because of what drains into it.

"Yesterday was some of the lowest we've seen in quite some time, but still it's above recreational water quality standards and that's our obligation," he added Thursday.

Officials are also concerned about high bacteria levels in Waiopili Stream on Kauai. Warning signs have been posted there as well.

Children, the elderly, and people with weakened immune systems or open wounds are the most likely populations to develop illnesses or infections after coming into contact with polluted water, usually while swimming.

A specific type of bacteria (*Enterococcus* sp.) is used as the indicator of the potential presence of pathogens which are harmful to humans. Both the DOH and EPA say they're working to improve monitoring protocols in Hawaii's recreational waters as well as public notification.

