Recreational Water Quality

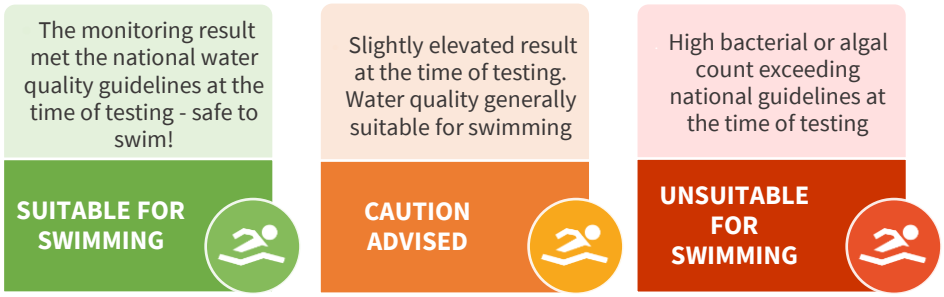
Annual Report Card 2026

Can I swim here?

Otago Regional Council monitors 35 popular recreational sites across the region on a weekly basis between December and March. Of these sites, 32 are monitored for faecal indicator bacteria to assess the risk of illness from disease-causing pathogens —16 freshwater sites are tested for *Escherichia coli* (*E. coli*) and 16 coastal sites are tested for enterococci.

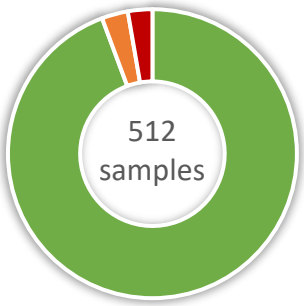
Cyanobacteria (toxic algae) are also monitored at a subset of locations due to the risk posed to human and animal health by naturally occurring toxins. Monitoring includes seven sites (three lakes and four rivers) where both recreation water quality and toxic algae are monitored and three additional lake sites that are monitored for toxic algae only

National guidelines [1,2] are used to assess the results and determine whether the water quality is safe for swimming.



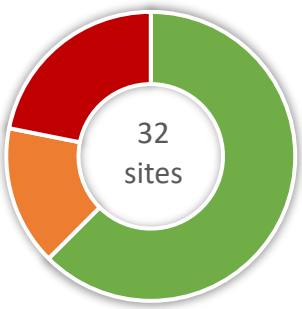
Results are reported on LAWA using a traffic light system and are notified to the Public Health Service and district councils when public health warnings are required.

Summer 2025-26 results



Microbial water quality (*E. coli* and enterococci)

- 512 water samples were collected over the summer monitoring period
- 94% of samples found that water quality was suitable for swimming at the time of sampling
- 3% of samples exceeded the caution advised guideline due to slightly elevated bacteria levels
- 3% of samples found that water quality was unsuitable for swimming and a health warning was issued to the public
- At 20 sites, all samples met the suitable for swimming guidelines. A further five sites were generally safe for swimming but had at least one result with slightly elevated bacteria levels (caution advised).
- Water quality was unsuitable for swimming at 7 sites – for most of these sites this meant a single high bacteria result typically following rainfall in the catchment.



Results for each site are presented in **Appendix 1.**

Cyanobacteria (toxic algae)

Toxic algal blooms were observed in three of the six monitored lakes: Butchers Dam, Lake Waihola and Tomahawk Lagoon. Toxic algae did not exceed the health warning trigger level at any of the five river sites monitored for recreational water quality.

This summer's weather was often cool and unsettled, which likely limited the extent of toxic algae growth, as reflected by the reduced number of public observations and enquiries received over the summer.

Toxic algae bloom at Tomahawk Lagoon, March 2026

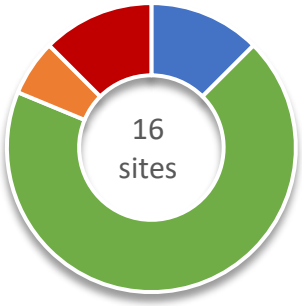
Long-term grades

Freshwater Sites: National Policy Statement-Freshwater Management (NPS-FM)

Under the NPS-FM 2020[3] regional councils are required to assess primary contact sites using the 95th percentile from five years of bathing season monitoring data to categorise sites into four bands or grades (Excellent, Good, Fair and Poor). For the 2020-2025 period:

- Most sites (69%) are graded Excellent or Good
- Three sites are graded Fair and two sites are graded Poor (below the national bottom line)
- For three of the 16 freshwater recreational water quality sites grades are considered interim because the data record is <5 years.

Coastal Sites: Microbiological Assessment Categories (MACs)



For coastal sites, MAC grades are similarly calculated based on five years of monitoring data to give an indication of general water quality over an extended period. For the 2020-2025 period:

- Most sites (81%) are graded Excellent or Good
- One site is graded Fair and two sites are graded Poor

Long-term grades and the percentage of samples exceeding guidelines are presented in **Appendix 2**.

References

[1] Ministry for the Environment and Ministry of Health (2003). Microbiological water quality guidelines for marine and freshwater recreational areas. Ministry for the Environment, Wellington.

[2] Ministry for the Environment and Health New Zealand. 2024. Aotearoa New Zealand Guidelines for Cyanobacteria in Recreational Freshwaters. Wood SA, Puddick J, Hamilton DP, Paul WJ, Safi KA, Williamson WM, Thomson-Laing G, Hawes I, McBride G, Kelly LT, Holloway M, Cridge B, Cressey P, Fairbrother P (Eds). Wellington: Ministry for the Environment.

[3] Ministry for the Environment (2020). National Policy Statement for Freshwater Management 2020 (amended January 2024). Ministry for the Environment, Wellington.

Appendix 1 – Recreational water quality 2025-26 monitoring results for primary contact sites in Otago by Freshwater Management Unit (FMU)

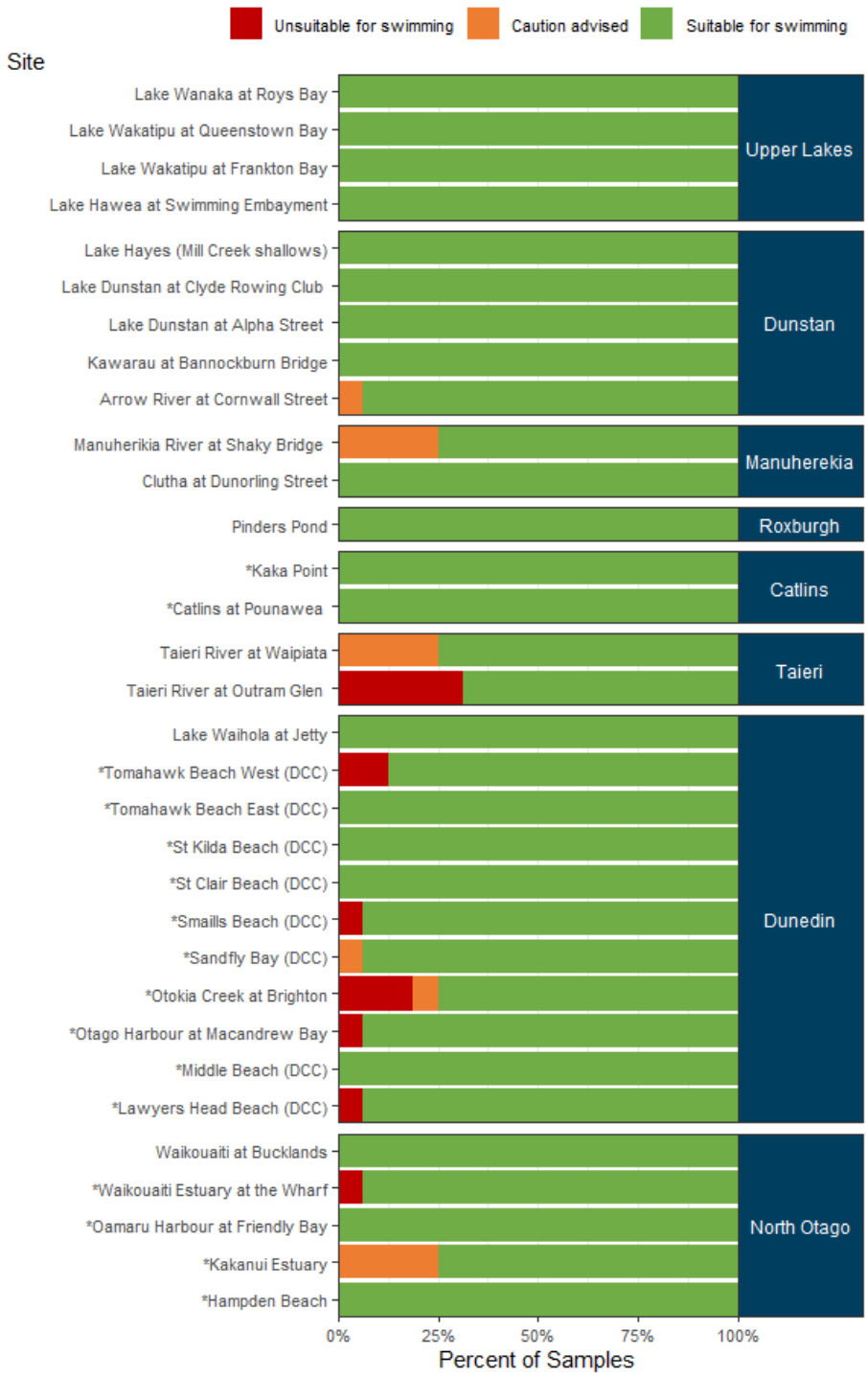


*Figure 1. Percentage of samples which met surveillance (suitable for swimming), alert (caution advised) and action (unsuitable for swimming) guidelines for primary contact sites monitored weekly across Otago (grouped by Freshwater Management Unit FMU/Rohe) in the 2025-26 bathing season. For freshwater sites E. coli concentrations were assessed; for coastal sites (marked *) Enterococci concentrations were assessed.*

Appendix 2 – Long-term (five-year) recreational water quality monitoring results for primary contact sites in Otago

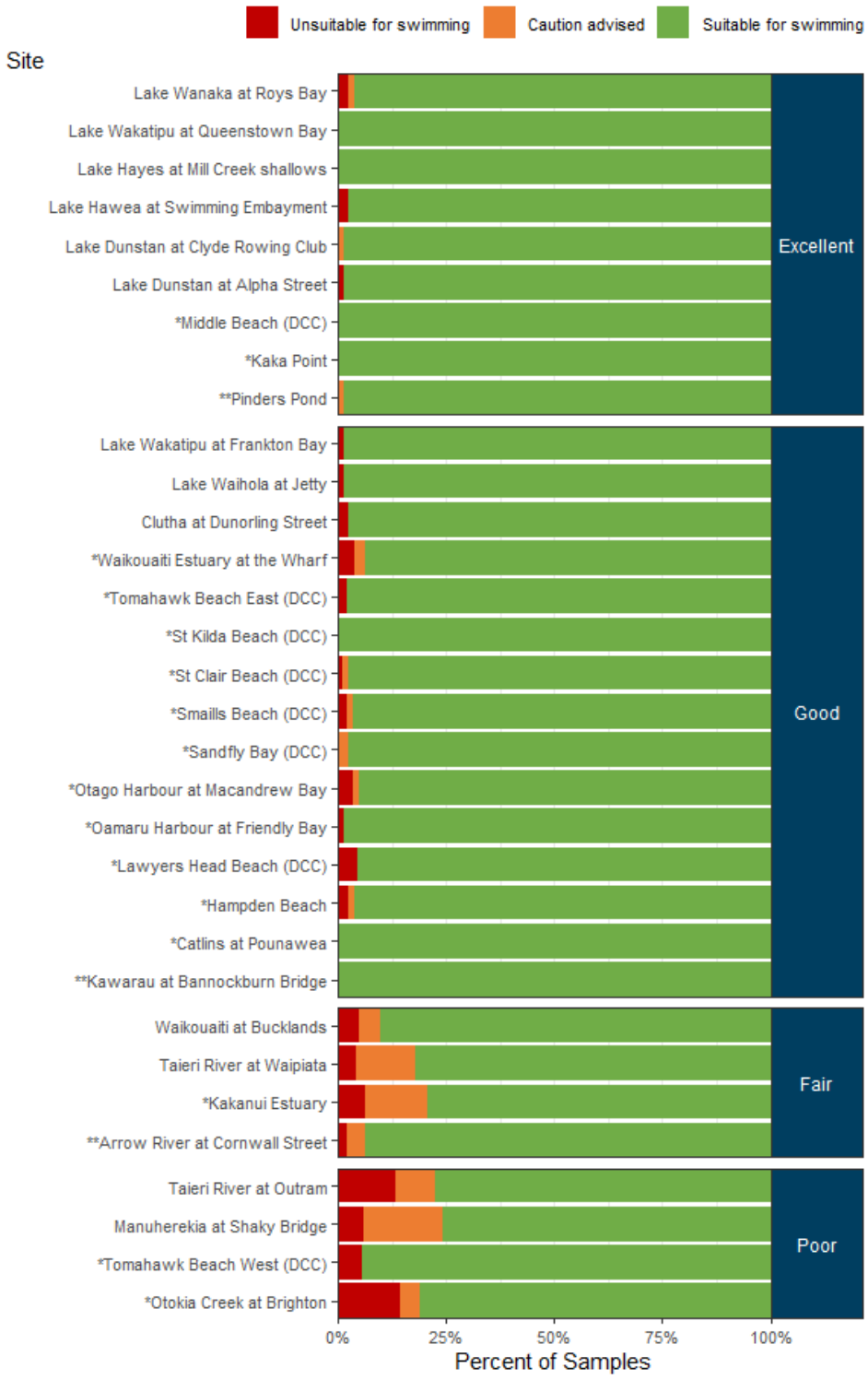


*Figure 2. Percentage of samples over the past five years which met surveillance (suitable for swimming), alert (caution advised) and action (unsuitable for swimming) guidelines for primary contact sites monitored weekly across Otago, grouped by the associated long-term grades (blue panels). Long-term grades are based on Hazen 95th percentile results from five seasons of data (2021-22 to 2025-26). For freshwater sites E. coli concentrations were assessed; for coastal sites (marked *) Enterococci concentrations were assessed. Grades are interim for sites monitored for less than five years (**)*