

Sailing official wants Rio water pollution tests

May 19 2014, by Stephen Wade



In this May 15, 2014 photo, trash floats on a polluted water channel that flows into the Guanabara Bay in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. With just over two years to go until the Rio Olympics, nearly 70 percent of the sewage in the metropolitan area of 12 million inhabitants continues to flow untreated, along with thousands of tons of garbage daily, into area rivers, the bay and even Rio's famed beaches like Copacabana and Ipanema. Several Olympic sports federations raised fears that Rio's polluted waters could prove harmful to athletes' health. Exposure to fecal matter can cause Hepatitis A, dysentery, cholera other diseases. (AP Photo/Felipe Dana)

Sailing's governing body may conduct independent water-quality tests in Rio de Janeiro's polluted Guanabara Bay, the sailing venue for the 2016 Olympics and the site of Rio's first test event in 2½ months.

Any hope Brazil would be able to clean up the sewage-filled bay soon was quashed in a document obtained by The Associated Press over the weekend.

In a May 7 letter to sports minister Aldo Rebelo, Rio's state environment secretary Carlos Francisco Portinho acknowledged in a best-case scenario that pollution flowing into the bay could be cut to "over 50 percent"—well below the promised reduction of 80 percent.

Alastair Fox, head of competitions for the international sailing federation, told the AP the body is likely to test on its own, hoping to allay athletes' health concerns.

The tests could also push Rio organizers to move more quickly on the problem.

Fox said he hoped the International Olympic Committee would do independent testing, although the IOC indicated it had no such plans.

"If the IOC are not conducting water-quality tests, then I think it is very likely the ISAF will," Fox said Monday in an email. "Certainly compared to most sailing venues, the water quality is very, very bad."

Danish Olympian Allan Norregaard, a bronze medalist at the 2012 Olympics, said Guanabara was "the most polluted place I've ever been." Other sailors interviewed called it an "open sewer."

The bay and similar concerns about Rio's iconic Copacabana and Ipanema beaches add to the disarray plaguing South America's first

Olympics.

The IOC has sent a special troubleshooter to monitor progress, and last month IOC vice president John Coates said Rio's preparations were the "worst" in memory.



In this May 15, 2014 photo, kids play in the polluted waters of Guanabara Bay in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Little progress has been made in the clean up of the bay, and with just over two years to go until the Olympics, nearly 70 percent of the sewage in the metropolitan area of 12 million inhabitants continues to flow untreated, along with thousands of tons of garbage daily, into area rivers, the bay and even Rio's famed beaches like Copacabana and Ipanema. (AP Photo/Felipe Dana)

Spending on Rio has reached \$17 billion and is expected to rise.

Nearly 70 percent of Rio's sewage goes untreated into its waters. Exposure to fecal matter can cause hepatitis A, dysentery, cholera and other diseases.

The visible problem involves old couches, tires and dead animals floating in the 148-square mile (383-square kilometer) bay. State officials are using garbage boats to collect floating debris, with the detritus weaving giant blankets of human and industrial waste along noxious shorelines.

"If someone picks up a bag, or hits a sofa or something like that, then clearly that is going to affect them in the race," Fox said.

"We've seen numbers from teams of the fecal content in the Guanabara Bay, which clearly are not safe," Fox added. "For us, that's a matter of concern. We've been assured again by the organizers that they are doing everything they can."

The IOC said it had no plans to test, but suggested others might.

"We trust the organizers and (the) ISAF will carry out the necessary research and analysis that will be carefully considered in order to ensure the safety of the athletes," the IOC said in a statement.

The IOC did not respond to repeated requests to interview IOC Medical Director Dr. Richard Budgett about potential health risks to athletes. In March, Nawal El Moutawakel, head of the IOC inspection team in charge of preparing Rio, said she had been assured the bay could be "clean from garbage."

"I don't think we will forgive ourselves if we let the athletes compete in an environment that is not safe and secure," she said.



In this May 15, 2014 photo, a man jumps into the polluted waters of Guanabara Bay in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Brazil will not make good on its commitment to clean up Rio de Janeiro's sewage-filled Guanabara Bay by the 2016 Olympic Games, state environmental officials acknowledged in a letter obtained Saturday May 17, 2014, by The Associated Press. (AP Photo/Felipe Dana)

Malcolm Page, a two-time Olympic gold medalist and chairman of the sailing federation's Athletes' Commission, said he trusted state tests, but welcomed independent testing.

"If the Brazilians are happy to receive any of that independent help, it only makes dealing with the problem easier and removes any sugar-coating," he said. "The sailors are certainly worried about it."

An analysis last year of a decade's worth of government data on Guanabara and other waterways showed that sewage pollution indicators consistently spiked far above acceptable limits, even under Brazilian

laws that are far more lenient on pollution than those in the United States or Europe.



In this May 15, 2014 photo, untreated sewage creates a dark streak on the sand as it flows into the water of Guanabara Bay in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Brazil will not make good on its commitment to clean up Rio de Janeiro's sewage-filled Guanabara Bay by the 2016 Olympic Games. Little progress has been made on the clean up, and with just over two years to go until the Olympics, nearly 70 percent of the sewage in the metropolitan area of 12 million inhabitants continues to flow untreated, along with thousands of tons of garbage daily, into area rivers, the bay and even Rio's famed beaches like Copacabana and Ipanema. (AP Photo/Felipe Dana)

Fox said at least five courses—three inside the bay and two in the open Atlantic—would be used at the test event beginning Aug. 2. He said courses outside the bay had always been planned, not driven by the

pollution problems.

Fox said plans call for the medal race—the final race where the gold, silver and bronze medals are decided—to be held in Guanabara near Flamengo Beach, a venue convenient for fans.



In this May 15, 2014 photo, trash litters a forested area on the shores of Guanabara Bay in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The country will not make good on its commitment to clean up Rio de Janeiro's sewage-filled Guanabara Bay by the 2016 Olympic Games. Authorities pledged to cut by 80 percent the flow of pollution into Guanabara Bay by the 2016 Games through the expansion of the sewage network and the construction of River Treatment Units, or RTUs, built at the mouths of rivers flowing into the bay. The facilities would filter out much of the sewage and trash. But little progress has been made on either front. (AP Photo/Felipe Dana)

Signs around that beach warn against swimming.

Mario Moscatelli, a biologist and outspoken environmentalist, said retrieving the floating garbage in the bay was fine, but did not address the problem of untreated sewage.



In this May 15, 2014 photo, trash floats on a polluted water channel that flows into the Guanabara Bay in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. In its 2009 Olympic bid, officials promised that the city's waterways would be cleaned up but Brazil will not make good on its commitment to clean up Rio de Janeiro's sewage-filled Guanabara Bay by the 2016 Olympic Games. Little progress has been made on the clean up, and with just over two years to go until the Olympics, nearly 70 percent of the sewage in the metropolitan area of 12 million inhabitants continues to flow untreated, along with thousands of tons of garbage daily, into area rivers, the bay and even Rio's famed beaches like Copacabana and Ipanema. (AP Photo/Felipe Dana)

In an open letter to Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff, he asked for the "release of the funds needed to recover the environmental assets, which are being used in Rio as garbage dumps and latrines.

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