

Executive Summary

In 2007 beach closings and advisories hit their second highest level in the 18 years the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) has been tracking them. The number of closing and advisory days at ocean, bay, and Great Lakes beaches topped 20,000 for the third year in a row, confirming that our nation's beaches continue to suffer from serious water pollution that puts swimmers at risk.

For the third consecutive year, we were able to determine not only the number of closings and advisories, but also the number of times that each beach violated current public health standards. The percent of beach monitoring samples exceeding national health standards remained relatively steady at 7 percent in 2007, the same percentage recorded in 2006 and slightly less than the 8 percent recorded in 2005. Improved test results combined with fewer preemptive closings and advisories based on heavy rainfall translated into a better beach season last year for swimmers and coastal communities.

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Several parts of the country did not share in the good news, however. Great Lakes beaches and New York and New Jersey Atlantic beaches both saw increases in bacterial contamination of the waters, bringing an increase in closings and advisories, indicating that there are sources of human or animal wastes in the waters that are not being adequately addressed.

POLLUTED WATER MAKES BEACHGOERS SICK

In its most recent report, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention concluded that the incidence of infections associated with recreational water use has steadily increased over the past several decades. Data on the incidence of waterborne illness in the United States is notoriously unreliable because many people who get sick do not know that ingesting contaminated water was the cause. Epidemiological studies such as those conducted by the EPA in the Great Lakes show that as many as 10 percent of beachgoers report getting sick after swimming in beachwaters open for swimming. With the population in U.S. coastal areas growing, we can expect to see more Americans getting sick until the sources of beachwater contamination are addressed.

POLLUTED WATER HURTS COASTAL ECONOMIES

Dirty coastal waters threaten not only our health, but also our economy. Coastal “tourism and recreation constitute some of the fastest growing business sectors--enriching economies and supporting jobs in communities virtually everywhere along the coasts of the continental United States, southeast Alaska, Hawaii, and our island territories and commonwealths,” according to the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy.¹ The growing popularity of our coastal regions translates into new employment opportunities: in 2000, U.S. coastal tourism and recreation created 1.67 million jobs—a 41 percent increase compared to 1990—and led to worker earnings of \$13.8 billion. Annual economic output nearly doubled to \$29.5 billion during the same time period. Without a commitment to renewing the health of our coastal waters we will not put at risk the long-term health of our coastal economies.

BEACHWATER MONITORING STANDARDS ARE INADEQUATE

The federal public-health standard is more than 20 years old, does not provide information on the full range of waterborne illnesses that make beachgoers sick, and usually provides information that is 24 to 48 hours old. So, even if a

beach is deemed “safe” under the federal public health standard, it may still contain undetected human or animal waste that can make swimmers sick. As part of the BEACH Act, Congress required the EPA to modernize this outdated standard, but the EPA has not yet done so. Two summers ago, NRDC sued the EPA to force it to comply with the BEACH Act by accelerating its timetable for proposing new standards, setting standards that fully protect the public, and establishing testing methods that will enable public health officials to make prompt decisions about closing their beaches and issuing advisories. Americans need to know that the waters in which we swim, surf, and dive are safe. At a minimum, that means that recreational waters must be tested regularly, and the results must be measured against effective health standards. When waters do not meet these standards, authorities must promptly and adequately notify the public.

INADEQUATE CONTROLS ON BEACH POLLUTION SOURCES

While authorities are doing a better job monitoring beaches than they have in the past, the monitoring results reveal the extent to which they are failing to clean up the sources of beachwater pollution. More closings and advisories were tied to sewage and other sources of beachwater contamination than ever before. In 2007, the number of closing/advisory days due to sewage spills and overflows more than tripled to 4,097 days when compared to 2006. The number of closing/advisory days due to high bacteria levels from miscellaneous sources, such as boat discharges or wildlife, increased seven-fold to 3,087 days. One factor contributing to the problem is that BEACH Act grants are currently not available for source identification and correction, so NRDC is supporting federal legislation, the Beach Protection Act of 2007, that would double the amount of funding for BEACH Act grants and allow them to be used for sanitary surveys, source tracking, and other means of identifying and addressing the direct sources of the contamination. Expanded funding should allow monitoring to cover all designated coastal beaches. In the meantime, NRDC’s lawsuit is prodding the EPA to move forward with developing an improved public health standard and faster test methods. Finally, it is time for the EPA and state and local authorities to seriously address the sources of beachwater pollution, which most often are stormwater and sewage pollution. Prevention is the best way to make sure that a day at the beach will not turn into a night in the bathroom, or worse, in a hospital emergency room.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVING BEACHWATER QUALITY AND PROTECTING SWIMMERS’ HEALTH

- The EPA should accelerate its timetable for proposing new health standards for beachwater quality, set standards that fully protect the public, and establish testing methods that will enable public health officials to make prompt decisions about closing their beaches and issuing advisories.
- The EPA and states should tighten and enforce controls on all sources of beachwater pollution. Controls on sewage overflows, urban stormwater, and other sources of polluted runoff are particularly critical. The best way to prevent swimmers from getting sick is to clean up the water.
- Congress should pass the Beach Protection Act of 2007 (S. 2844, H.R. 2537). The Beach Protection Act would reauthorize the federal BEACH Act of 2000; double the authorized funding and allow that funding to be used for identifying and correcting sources of beachwater contamination; require the EPA to approve rapid test methods for monitoring beachwater pollution; and improve coordination between the public health officials who monitor the beachwater and the environmental agencies who regulate the sources of beachwater pollution.
- Congress should substantially increase the federal appropriations available to meet clean water and beach protection needs through the Clean Water State Revolving Fund, federal BEACH Act grants, and a Clean Water Trust Fund or other dedicated source of clean water funding.
- The EPA should promptly and effectively implement and enforce the BEACH Act by setting and enforcing minimum standards for all BEACH Act recipients to ensure comprehensive state and local monitoring of beachwater quality and prompt public notification when bacterial standards are exceeded.

- State and local governments should make preventing beachwater pollution a priority. They should adopt monitoring and closure programs that adequately protect the public, and they should conduct sanitary surveys to identify and then remedy the sources of beachwater pollution.
- State and local governments should issue preemptive advisories where a correlation between rainfall and elevated bacteria levels exists or when sewer overflows or other catastrophic events jeopardize beachwater safety.
- A portion of the revenues generated by tourism should be allocated to monitoring and prevention programs to ensure that swimming in coastal waters does not jeopardize the health of beachgoers.
- Voters should support increased federal, state, and local funding for urban stormwater programs and for repairing, rehabilitating, and upgrading our aging sewer systems. The public also should support funding for maintaining and expanding natural areas (wetlands, shoreline buffers, coastal vegetation) that trap and filter pollution before it reaches the beach.
- Individuals can help clean up beach pollution. Simple measures, including conserving water, redirecting runoff, using natural fertilizers and compost in gardens, maintaining septic systems, and properly disposing of animal waste, litter, toxic household products, and used motor oil can reduce the amount of pollution in coastal waters.

Notes

1 U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy, *Preliminary Report of the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy, Governor's Draft*, Washington, D.C., April 2004, pp. 2, 7, available at: <http://www.ocean.commission.gov>