

Executive Summary

In 2008, beach closings and advisories hit their fourth highest level in the 19 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 fourth year in a row, confirming that our nation's beaches continue to suffer from serious water pollution that puts swimmers at risk.

For the fourth 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. Analysis of beach monitoring data showed that the percent of water samples exceeding national health standards remained steady at 7 percent in 2008, 2007, and 2006, and 8 percent in 2005.

Improved test results combined with fewer preemptive rainfall closings and advisories due to drier weather translated into a better beach season last year for swimmers in many coastal communities. However, relying on dry weather to keep contaminated runoff from polluting beachwater is not a long term public health protection strategy; when the rains return, so do the beach closings and advisories. Even in the relatively dry 2008 beach season, stormwater runoff contributed to two-thirds of the closing/advisory days with a reported contamination source, indicating that there are sources of human or animal wastes that are not being adequately addressed.

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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 insufficient because many people who get sick have no idea 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 U.S. coastal populations growing, we can continue to expect more Americans to get sick until the sources of beachwater contamination are addressed.

POLLUTED WATER HURTS COASTAL ECONOMIES

Dirty coastal waters not only threaten our health, they hurt 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 That popularity translates into new employment opportunities: in 2000, U.S. coastal tourism and recreation created 1.67 million jobs—a 41 percent increase from 1990—earning workers \$13.8 billion in wages. Annual economic output nearly doubled during the same time period to \$29.5 billion.

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 requires test methods that usually take 24 hours to complete. 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. Congress required the EPA to modernize this outdated standard as part of the BEACH Act, but the EPA has not yet done so. Three 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 clearly notify the public.

INADEQUATE CONTROLS ON BEACH POLLUTION SOURCES

While authorities are doing a better job monitoring beaches than in the past, that monitoring reveals the extent to which they are failing to clean up the sources of beachwater pollution. In 2008, 62 percent of beach closing/advisory days were reported as due to unknown sources of contamination. Beach officials cannot clean up sources of pollution if they cannot identify them in the first place. One problem is that BEACH Act grants are currently not available for source identification and correction. NRDC is therefore supporting federal legislation—the Clean Coastal Environment and Public Health Act (H.R. 2093/S. 878)—that would increase the funding authorized 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, as a result of NRDC’s lawsuit, the EPA is moving forward with developing an improved public health standard and approving faster test methods.

Clearly 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.

GLOBAL WARMING WILL MAKE BEACHWATER POLLUTION WORSE

The U.S. House of Representatives has already passed and the Senate is now considering legislation that would limit U.S. emissions of global warming pollution, invest in clean energy technologies, and create millions of jobs in the new energy economy. Passage of this legislation is critical to addressing the wide range of impacts of global warming on coastal communities, which will exacerbate existing causes of beachwater pollution that threaten public health. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change found that “water-borne diseases and degraded water quality are very likely to increase with more heavy precipitation.”²

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVING BEACHWATER QUALITY AND PROTECTING SWIMMERS’ HEALTH

- The EPA should propose new health standards for beachwater quality 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 Clean Coastal Environment and Public Health Act (H.R. 2093/S. 878), which would reauthorize the federal BEACH Act of 2000, increase the authorized funding and allow that funding to be used for

identifying and correcting sources of beachwater contamination, require the EPA to approve and states to use 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 also pass the American Clean Energy and Security Act (H.R. 2454, also known as ACES), which will reduce emissions of global warming pollution and help communities prepare for flooding, sea level rise, increased stormwater pollution, sewer overflows, and other adverse impacts of climate change.
- 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.
- Congress should pass the Sewage Overflow Community Right-to-Know Act (H.R. 753/S. 937), which would require immediate reporting of sewage overflows to public health authorities and to the general public, allowing for prompt responses to overflows that would minimize human exposure and environmental harm.
- 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 such as wetlands, shoreline buffers, and 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 such natural fertilizers as compost for 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.oceancommission.gov>

2 IPCC, Technical Paper IV, Climate Change and Water, June 2008, pp. 103. Available at: <http://www.ipcc.ch/pdf/technical-papers/climate-change-water-en.pdf>.