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Annual Vacation Beach Water Quality Report Documents Ohio's Beach Health Advisories

For another year, Ohio ranks 2nd in the nation for failing to meet national health standards

COLUMBUS, OHIO – As summer is well under way and families flock to America's coastal beaches, they often find that an unwelcome "intruder" has beaten them to the shore: an official beach advisory, warning people not to enter the water because it is contaminated with dangerous bacteria.

Along Ohio's Lake Erie coast, beach advisories remain a common occurrence. Last year Ohio ranked second in the nation for the number of coastal beach advisories, according to the 19th annual beach water quality report released today by the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), the Ohio Environmental Council, and Environment Ohio.

Using the latest data from the U.S. EPA, the "*Testing the Waters: A Guide to Water Quality at Vacation Beaches*" report tallied 783 health advisory days in 2008 for Ohio beaches, up 19% from the 657 days in 2007. The report is available at <http://www.nrdc.org/beaches>.

A beach advisory is issued when the level of bacteria in the water is higher than the maximum standard allowed for safe swimming. Under Ohio Department of Health rules, most beach postings only advise against—but do not actually prohibit—entering the water.

"We have come far, but additional work is needed to safeguard public health. Advisories continue to turn families and children away from the beach, all because of outdated and overwhelmed sewage and stormwater treatment systems," said Coby Williams, Legislative & Public Affairs Associate for the Ohio Environmental Council.

Tainted beach water can expose beachgoers to a range of waterborne illnesses, including gastroenteritis, dysentery, hepatitis, respiratory ailments and other serious health problems. For senior citizens, small children, and people with weak immune systems, the results can be fatal.

Nationwide, sewage spills and overflows caused more than 20,000 beach closing and advisory days in 2008, down 10% from 2007. This was due to overall drier conditions across the country, producing less stormwater runoff. However, in Ohio, there was a 19% increase in the number of advisory days from 2007. For another year, Ohio ranks 2nd nationally for failing to meet national health standards. The report indicates waters along the Great Lakes coastline are the dirtiest in the country. Studies by the

EPA in the Great Lakes show as many as 10% of beach goers report getting sick after swimming in beachwaters.

“When families head to the beach this summer, they shouldn’t have to worry about swimming in polluted water that can make them sick, said Amanda Moore, Environment Ohio Field Organizer. “Ohioans shouldn’t have to choose between swimming in sewage and staying out of the water.”

Beach advisories represent not only a health hazard, but also a loss in economic revenue. Studies in Michigan have indicated economic losses ranging from \$7,935 to \$37,030 per day, due to recreational activity lost because of beach advisories.

Aging and poorly-designed sewage and stormwater systems hold much of the blame for beach water pollution. Record rainfalls in recent years have also added to the strain on already overloaded infrastructure. Report authors also found that poor suburban developments in coastal areas are devouring wetlands and other natural buffers such as dunes and beach grass that would otherwise help filter out dangerous pollution.

This pollution is only expected to get worse as global warming continues. The combined effects of temperature increases and more frequent and intense rainstorms will lead to increased stormwater runoff, sewer pollution and disease-causing pathogens in nearby waterways. Specifically, global warming is anticipated to influence the presence of pathogens that cause stomach flu, diarrhea and neurological problems in America’s beachwater. The report recommends that Congress 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.

So far in 2009, beach advisory warning signs have interrupted over 140 days of the summer swimming season at public Lake Erie beaches monitored by the Ohio Department of Health.

Top four 2009 Ohio’s Beach advisories at a glance (May 21, 2009 – July 22, 2009):

<u>Beach</u>	<u>County</u>	<u>Advisory Posting Recommended</u>
Villa Angela State Park	Cuyahoga	30
Euclid State Park	Cuyahoga	25
Lakeshore Park	Ashtabula	10
Edgewater Beach	Cuyahoga	10

To see the number of beach advisories for all 23 public Lake Erie beaches go to www.TheOEC.org.

Even beaches that meet federal health standards are not necessarily safe. The current beach water quality standards are at least 20 years old, dating back to 1986, and rely on obsolete monitoring methods and outdated science. Those obsolete standards don’t identify all of the sources of contamination that can make people sick.

In 2000, Congress passed the Beaches Environmental Assessment and Coastal Health Act (BEACH Act), which required the EPA to revise the current health standards by October 2005. The agency missed the deadline, and now says it will not be able to finish updating them until 2011.

Congress should act swiftly to pass the Senate’s version of the Clean Coastal Environment and Public Health Act of 2009 (Senate Bill 787), formerly known as the BEACH Act. This legislation would:

- Require the employment of real-time testing methodologies. Current methods for testing beach water pollution take 24 to 48 hours to obtain results, so beachgoers are unknowingly swimming in human and animal waste. Real-time testing takes 2 to 4 hours instead of days. Real-time testing methodologies are now available, but not yet approved by the USEPA.
- Double the amount of money authorized for beach water protection programs and would allow for a portion of those funds to be used for tracking and correcting the sources of beach water pollution.

Congress also should fully fund the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative at \$475 million. The Great Lakes Restoration Initiative funding also would provide funding to remediate the problems that cause these continuous beach advisories. Together these two pieces of legislation ensure safer recreational opportunities for our families.

“The public should be able to spend their summer days enjoying these great resources for the region without being turned away from swimming at their local beaches,” said Williams. “Especially if we know the sources of the pollution and we have manageable solutions. It is time that we use those manageable solutions. Everyday we wait, the problems get worse and the solutions get more costly.”

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The mission of the Ohio Environmental Council (OEC) is to secure healthy air, land, and water for all who call Ohio home. The OEC is Ohio’s leading advocate for fresh air, clean water, and sustainable land use. The OEC has a 40-year history of innovation, pragmatism, and success. Using legislative initiatives, legal action, scientific principles, and statewide partnerships, the OEC secures a healthier environment for Ohio’s families and communities. For more information, visit www.theOEC.org.

We all want clean air, clean water and open spaces. But it takes independent research and tough-minded advocacy to win concrete results for our environment, especially when powerful interests stand in the way of environmental progress. That's the idea behind Environment Ohio. We focus exclusively on protecting Ohio's air, water and open spaces. We speak out and take action at the local, state and national levels to improve the quality of our environment and our lives. For more information, visit www.EnvironmentOhio.org.

The Natural Resources Defense Council is a national, non-profit organization of scientists, lawyers and environmental specialists dedicated to protecting public health and the environment. Founded in 1970, NRDC has more than 1.2 million members and online activists nationwide served from offices in New York, Washington, Chicago, Santa Monica and San Francisco. For more information, visit www.NRDC.org.