

Clean Water News

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CONTACTS: Rosemary Wehnes, Sierra Club, 414-453-3127

Cheryl Nenn, Friends of Milwaukee's Rivers, 414-287-0207

Water Pollution Forces More Wisconsin Beach Closings

Monitoring Uncovers Dangerous Bacteria in More Places, More Often; Better Pollution Prevention Needed to Get Swimmers Back in the Water

Milwaukee (July 28, 2005) -- Beach closings due to hazardous bacterial contamination increased at Wisconsin beaches, according to an annual report released today by the Natural Resources Defense Council. The report tallied 984 closing and health advisory days in 2004 in Wisconsin, a 33 percent jump from 738 the previous year. Ninety-six percent of last year's closing days were prompted by unsafe levels of bacteria in the water, indicating the presence of human or animal waste.

"Instead of closing our beaches, let's clean up the water," said Rosemary Wehnes, Sierra Club conservation organizer. "Authorities have gotten better at finding problems. Now they need to stop the pollution at its source by repairing and replacing leaky sewage and septic systems, and cleaning up contaminated runoff."

Nationally, NRDC's report found nearly 20,000 closing and advisory days in 2004. That's the most since NRDC began tracking the problem 15 years ago. One reason, the group says, is that improved monitoring spurred by previous reports is now uncovering the true extent of the pollution problem.

The report, "Testing the Waters," which covers ocean, coastal bay and Great Lakes beaches, is available on line at www.nrdc.org/water/oceans/ttw/titinx.asp.

"This is a nationwide problem that demands a nationwide solution," said Nancy Stoner, director of NRDC's Clean Water Project. "We need more federal help for local communities to control runoff and update their aging sewage systems, and we need stronger enforcement standards for those who aren't doing their share."

Eighty-five percent of the closing and advisory days nationally were triggered by high bacteria levels. The main culprits are improperly treated sewage and bacteria-contaminated stormwater runoff. The bacteria cause a wide range of diseases, including gastroenteritis; dysentery; hepatitis; ear, nose and throat problems; and respiratory ailments. Consequences are worse for children, the elderly, pregnant women, and anyone with a weakened immune system.

Polluted beachwater not only poses a threat to public health, it also hurts local businesses. Coastal tourism and recreation are two of the fastest growing businesses in the country, according to the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy. But Wisconsin "beachonomics" would be even more robust if communities were not forced to close their beaches because of pollution. For example, one study cited in NRDC's report estimated that closing a beach on Lake Michigan could result in economic losses of as much as \$37,000 per day.

Reasons for the nationwide jump in closings and advisories last year include:

- the continuing failure of most municipalities to identify and clean up pollution sources;
- more frequent monitoring, prompted at least in part by earlier NRDC reports;
- heavier than average rainfall in some states, which flushed more pollution into local waterways;
- implementation of the federal Beaches Environmental Assessment, Closure and Health (BEACH) Act, which passed in 2000 and went into effect in early 2004. The law requires all coastal and Great Lakes states and U.S. territories to adopt the Environmental Protection Agency's

recommended bacterial standards, provides grants for monitoring and public notification programs, and requires the EPA to make beach water quality data easily accessible.

Beach Buddies and Beach Bums

NRDC's report identifies the best and worst performers when it comes to protecting beachgoers from contaminated water. NRDC named its annual Beach Buddies—jurisdictions that monitor beachwater quality regularly, close beaches or notify the public when at least one of EPA's health standards is exceeded, and take significant steps to reduce pollution. This year's Beach Buddy in the Great Lakes basin is:

- Door County, Wisconsin.

The annual list of Beach Bums—communities that do not monitor pollution and warn the public when beachwater is unsafe, or fail to control sources of pollution—include from the Great Lakes basin:

- Van Buren County, Michigan (west of Kalamazoo on Lake Michigan).

“These two groups represent the best and worst in water quality and health safeguards for beachgoers,” said Mark Dorfman, the author of the NRDC report. “They are case studies in what, and what not to do to protect the 180 million Americans who come out to enjoy the beaches each year.”

'Testing the Waters 2005' Recommendations

The report calls on Congress to reauthorize and fully fund the BEACH Act, and urges the Environmental Protection Agency to tighten controls on sewer overflows and stormwater discharges, ensure that states and localities monitor water quality and notify the public when it does not meet bacterial standards, and set standards to protect the public from waterborne pathogens.

At the state and local level, 'Testing the Waters 2005' recommends governments adopt rigorous monitoring and beach closure programs, identify pollution sources, and get to work cleaning them up. In addition, authorities should issue advisories when heavy rainfall causes bacteria levels to jump, and when sewer overflows or other similar problems jeopardize beachwater safety.

“Citizens also can do a number of things to improve beachwater quality, said Cheryl Nenn, Riverkeeper for Friends of Milwaukee's Rivers, including capturing runoff from roofs and driveways with rain barrels, rain gardens, and native plantings; maintaining septic systems and private sewer laterals; picking up pet waste; minimizing chemical fertilizer and pesticide use on lawns and gardens; properly disposing of garbage/food waste at the beach that attracts geese and gulls; and supporting legislation and funding to keep beachwater clean, fix aging sewer systems, and protect wetlands and coastal vegetation.”

“Our citizens can also have an impact by supporting the Great Lakes Restoration plan,” said Dale Olen, Sierra Club volunteer. The EPA estimates there are \$3.5 billion in clean water needs waiting to be funded in Wisconsin. “A fully funded restoration plan would provide resources to help clean up the pollutants that are causing our beaches to close.” The draft plan was released on July 7th for 60 days of public comment. Comments can be submitted at <http://www.glrc.us/> or attend the public hearing on August 22nd at the Wisconsin State Fair Park Youth Center from 6:30pm-9:00pm.

Sierra Club is a national grassroots environmental group working to protect the environment for our families and our future. Sierra Club has 3600 members in the Milwaukee metropolitan area.

Friends of Milwaukee's Rivers is a member of the Waterkeeper Alliance, a national coalition dedicated to protecting and restoring our nation's waterways, and is the licensed Riverkeeper® for Milwaukee.