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Contamination Forced More than 3,000 Florida Beach Closings Last Year

Better Pollution Prevention Needed to Get Swimmers Back in the Water

TALLAHASSEE (July 28, 2005)—Beach closings due to hazardous bacterial contamination dipped slightly at Florida beaches last year, according to an annual report released today by the Natural Resources Defense Council. The report tallied 3,345 closing and health advisory days in 2004, a 16 percent drop from the nearly 4,000 days the previous year. All 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 Linda Young, southeast regional director for the Clean Water Network. “Authorities have gotten better at finding the problem. 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, bay and Great Lakes beaches, is available at www.nrdc.org/water/oceans/ttw/titinx.asp. (Another national organization, Surfrider Foundation, released its 2005 “State of the Beach” report today, which provides information on beach ecology, access, erosion and water quality, including material from NRDC's report and other sources. The report can be viewed at www.surfrider.org/stateofthebeach.)

States with the biggest jump in closing and advisory days compared with 2003 were Texas (1,074 percent), Washington (700 percent), Maryland (405 percent), Minnesota (333 percent), Michigan (174 percent), New York (117 percent) and Illinois (102 percent). Hawaii went from no closing or advisory days in 2003 to 1,169 in 2004; Maine went from none in 2003 to 56 in 2004. Nationally the number jumped 9 percent, from 18,224 days in 2003 to 19,950 days in 2004.

“This is a nationwide problem that demands a nationwide solution,” said Nancy Stoner, director of NRDC's Clean Water Project. “We need stronger enforcement for those who aren't doing their share, and we need more federal help for local communities to control runoff and update their aging sewage systems. Just this week, Congress cut the Clean Water State Revolving Fund, the

main federal support for water infrastructure. We're going backward." (For more information on the state revolving fund's status, go to <http://www.nrdc.org/media/pressreleases/050727a.asp>.)

All of the closings and advisories in Florida were due to dangerously high levels of bacteria, indicating an increased risk to swimmers of getting sick. 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. Most of the bacteria causing the closings and advisories in Florida came from unknown sources, which means that the state has a lot of work to do to identify the sources and clean them up.

For the first time, NRDC analyzed data showing how many beach samples violated the public health-based bacteria standard at Florida's beaches. The organization found that Florida's beaches violated the public health standard an average of 3 percent of the time, but that some beaches violated standards much more often. The five beaches with the highest percentage of samples in violation were Phil Foster Park Beach in Palm Beach County (46 percent of the time), Bayou Chico Beach in Escambia County (36 percent), South Beach in Monroe County (30 percent), Alligator Point Beach in Franklin County (29 percent), and Dekle Beach in Taylor County (29 percent).

Polluted beachwater not only poses a threat to public health, it can hurt local businesses. Ocean-related economic activity alone contributed more than \$200 billion to the U.S. economy in 2000, and coastal tourism and recreation are two of the fastest growing businesses in the country, according to the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy. In Florida, coastal tourism generated \$57 billion and supported more than 900,000 jobs in 2004, according to the Florida Tourism Industry Marketing Corporation. But Florida "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.

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 Buddies are:

- the city of Los Angeles;
- Scarborough State Beach, Rhode Island (between Narragansett and Point Judith); and
- Door County, Wisconsin (northeast of Green Bay).

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:

- Los Angeles County and 44 cities in the county, including Beverly Hills, Claremont, Pomona

and Whittier (see <http://www.nrdc.org/media/docs/050728.pdf> for the complete list);

- Van Buren County, Michigan (west of Kalamazoo on Lake Michigan); and
- Atlantic Beach, North Carolina (south of Morehead City).

“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.”

NRDC Recommendations

The report calls on Congress to fully fund the BEACH Act and the Clean Water State Revolving Fund, the principal source of federal support for water infrastructure. The report also 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, NRDC 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, including capturing runoff from roofs and driveways; maintaining septic systems; picking up pet waste; avoiding chemical fertilizers and pesticides on lawns and gardens; and supporting legislation and funding to keep beachwater clean, fix aging sewer systems, and protect wetlands and coastal vegetation.

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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, Santa Monica and San Francisco. More information about NRDC is available through its Web site: www.nrdc.org.