



Nationwide Bacteria Standards Protect Swimmers at Beaches

Summary

EPA is taking an important step forward in fulfilling the Administration's commitment to further protect the quality of the nation's beaches. EPA is establishing more protective health-based federal bacteria criteria for those states and territories bordering Great Lakes or ocean waters that have not yet adopted criteria in accordance with the BEACH Act of 2000. These federal water quality criteria are part of the Administration's Clean Beaches Plan, which also includes grants to states and territories for beach monitoring and public notification programs, technical guidance, and scientific studies.



Background

The BEACH Act

The Beaches Environmental Assessment and Coastal Health (BEACH) Act of 2000 requires each state and territory with coastal recreation waters to adopt into their water quality standards by April 10, 2004, bacteria criteria that are "as protective of human health as" EPA's 1986 bacteria criteria. The BEACH Act defines coastal recreation waters as the Great Lakes and coastal waters (including coastal estuaries) that states, territories, and authorized tribes officially recognize (or "designate") for swimming, bathing, surfing, or similar activities in the water.

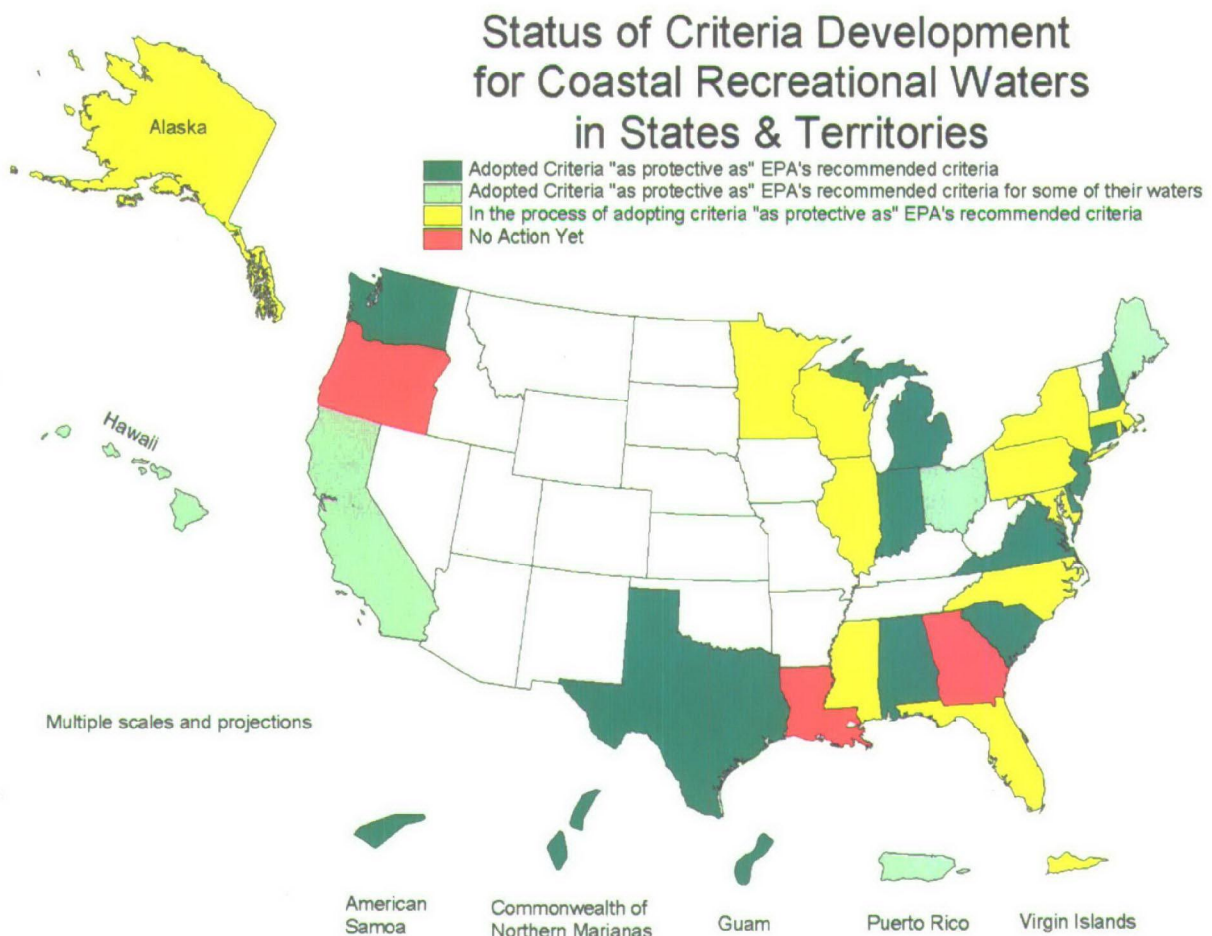
The Bacteria Criteria

Most disease-causing microbes exist in very small amounts and are difficult and expensive to find in water samples. "Indicator organisms" have been used for more than a century to help identify where fecal contamination has occurred and, therefore, where disease-causing microbes may be present. These organisms generally do not cause illness themselves. They do have characteristics that make them good indicators that fecal contamination has occurred and that harmful pathogens may be in the water.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, EPA conducted public health studies evaluating several organisms as possible indicators, including fecal coliforms, *E. coli*, and enterococci. The studies showed that enterococci was a very good predictor of illness in all waters, and *E. coli* was a very good predictor in fresh waters. As a result, EPA recommended in 1986 the use of *E. coli* for fresh recreational waters (criteria set at 126/100mL) and enterococci for fresh and marine recreational waters (criteria set at 33/100mL in freshwater and 35/100mL in marine water). These new recommendations replaced EPA's previously recommended bacteria criteria for fecal coliform of 200/100mL.

What this rule does

Through this final rule, EPA is establishing federal criteria for those states and territories with coastal recreation waters that have not yet adopted bacteria criteria as protective of health as EPA's 1986 criteria. Of the 35 states and territories that have coastal or Great Lakes recreational waters, 14 have adopted criteria as protective of health as EPA's recommended criteria for all their coastal recreation waters, 5 have adopted criteria as protective as EPA's recommended criteria for some of their coastal recreation waters, and 13 states are in the process of adopting protective criteria. When this final rule was issued, three states had not yet started adopting EPA's recommended criteria (Georgia, Louisiana, and Oregon). When a state or territory adopts new standards as protective of human health as EPA's 1986 bacteria criteria, EPA will approve those standards and withdraw the federal criteria for that state or territory.



States and territories that have adopted criteria “as protective as” EPA’s recommended criteria:

Alabama	Delaware	New Jersey
American Samoa	Guam	South Carolina
Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands	Indiana	Texas
Connecticut	Michigan	Virginia
	New Hampshire	Washington

States and territories that have adopted criteria “ as protective as” EPA’s recommended criteria for some of their coastal recreation waters:

California	Maine	Puerto Rico
Hawaii	Ohio	

States and territories in the process of adopting criteria “as protective as” EPA’s recommended criteria.

Alaska	Minnesota	Pennsylvania
Florida	Mississippi	Rhode Island
Illinois	New York	Virgin Islands
Maryland	North Carolina	Wisconsin
Massachusetts		

Other EPA and state efforts to protect recreational waters

EPA works with states and territories in a number of ways. Every year since 2001, EPA has awarded about \$10 million in grants to eligible states and territories to develop and implement beach water quality monitoring and notification programs in coastal and Great Lakes recreational waters. EPA also funds beach-related research and provides technical support to states and territories. EPA is now developing new water quality criteria for the protection of swimmers, based on new health studies that the Agency is conducting

How to find out whether a particular beach is safe

The best way to find out about the safety of a beach is to contact the local public health officials who manage the beach. State and local officials make public health decisions about beach use. In many cases, they monitor for *E. coli* or enterococci to determine beach safety -- even though the state may not have yet adopted these criteria into their water quality standards.

To find local beach contacts, go to: www.epa.gov/beaches/plan/whereyoulive_state.html.

For More Information

For more information on this final rule, please contact Lars Wilcut at 202-566-0447 or wilcut_lars@epa.gov. More information about EPA’s Beaches Program is available at: www.epa.gov/beaches/. You can learn more about water quality standards by visiting www.epa.gov/waterscience/standards/.