

Department of Environmental Conservation

Water Quality Standards, Assessment, and Restoration Program

Frequently Asked Questions



2018 Ketchikan BEACH Monitoring Program

What is the BEACH program?

The Beaches Environmental Assessment and Coastal Health (BEACH) Act was passed by the U.S. Congress in 2002 in response to increased occurrences of water-borne illnesses. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) administers grant funds to states, tribes and territories under the Act to establish monitoring and public notification programs. The BEACH program has established national marine water quality monitoring and reporting standards for fecal waste contamination and notifies the public when levels exceed state standards.

Why monitor Ketchikan beaches?

The Alaska BEACH program was initiated in Ketchikan to evaluate potential health risks by fecal coliform and enterococci bacteria, and to notify the public when levels exceeded state recreation standards. Marine water samples are collected along the Ketchikan coastline to monitor fecal waste contamination during the recreation season. Coastal marine water was monitored in 2017 from July through September and is scheduled in 2018 from May through September.

What areas are being monitored?

In 2017, water samples were collected at nine coastal areas in Ketchikan including: Rotary Beach Park, Seaport Beach, Thomas Basin, south of South Refuge Cove State Recreation Site, beach off Sunset Drive, beach at Shull Road, South Point Higgins Beach, Beacon Hill, and Knudson Cove.

In 2018, two additional coastal areas were recommended by the Our Way of Life Committee of Ketchikan. These areas are situated in on Mountain Point and Herring Cove.

Why were these locations chosen for monitoring?

Monitoring site selection for the 2017 program was based on information collected from the Alaska Beach Survey. The survey assessed the types of recreational activities and the level of use during the recreational season for beaches around Ketchikan. Since the survey was conducted and sampling began, two additional locations, Mountain Point Coast area and Herring Cove have been identified as having high recreational use (e.g., scuba diving, marine foods harvesting).

What are the potential sources of bacteria?

Potential bacteria sources present along the Ketchikan coast include: boats in harbor and launch areas, cruise ships, private watercraft and ferries, individual septic tanks, private and/or public sewer treatment system outfall(s), public treatment system emergency bypasses, sewer line breaks, pet feces, and wildlife.

What did the 2017 results say?

The monitoring results revealed that state recreation water quality standards were exceeded nearly every week from July 24 through August 29 at most of the nine locations. Based on these elevated bacteria levels, and to determine the relative human health risk to beach users, samples were collected on August 8 and 9 for DNA marker testing to help determine the potential source(s). The testing outcome revealed that human fecal waste sources were associated with all of the nine monitoring locations along the Ketchikan coastline.

Is the water safe to swim in?

When elevated fecal bacteria levels are present in the marine water, precautionary measures are advised. DEC recommends people avoid exposure, such as swimming in the water, and wash after contact with the marine water. Commonly documented health issues from swimming in bacteria contaminated recreational waters include gastrointestinal illness, respiratory illnesses, skin rashes, and ear, eye, and wound infections.

Is the fish safe to eat?

When elevated fecal bacteria levels are present, precautionary measures are advised. DEC recommends rinsing fish with clean water after they have been harvested from the area. As always, people should cook seafood to a minimum internal temperature of 145 degrees Fahrenheit to destroy pathogens.

What are the plans for this summer?

DEC plans to

1. Monitor for a second year at the 11 locations noted above
2. Identify potential sources using DNA testing
3. Notify the public when levels exceed water quality recreation criterion

What happens if there are elevated results?

DEC will continue to share the test results with the City and Borough of Ketchikan. If the levels exceed state recreation standards, DEC will issue a press release and post it on the Alaska BEACH Program website <http://dec.alaska.gov/water/water-quality/beach-program/>. The City and Borough of Ketchikan may post an advisory sign at the affected beach. Weekly samples will continue to be collected through September, and the information shared on the Alaska BEACH Program website.

What happens next?

The monitoring program will help support the development of recommendations for best management practices and treatment of wastewater to reduce bacteria levels along the Ketchikan coastline. The monitoring locations planned for testing include the nine high risk coastal areas sampled during the 2017 Ketchikan BEACH monitoring program, and two additional coastal areas recommended by tribal members of the Our Way of Life Committee of Ketchikan.

FOR ADDITIONAL PROGRAM INFORMATION

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