



Frequently Asked Questions: SKAGWAY BEACHES 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. In Alaska the BEACH funds come through DEC and are administered as grants to local communities. 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 Skagway Area beaches?

A monitoring program was initiated for the Skagway area beaches in 2023 (and will continue for the 2024 recreational beach season) to evaluate potential health risks by fecal coliform and enterococci bacteria, and to notify the public when levels exceeded state recreation standards. The monitoring information can be used by local communities to help make informed decisions.

When and where does monitoring occur?

Monitoring generally begins in May and continues into September to provide the information over the entire recreation period. Water samples are collected early in the week and sent to a lab for analysis. Results are posted to DEC's web page and on social media on Thursday or Friday that week. The Skagway Traditional Council will share monitoring updates on social media and at community presentations.

Water samples will be collected at five Skagway area beaches: Small Boat Harbor, Airport Beach, Yakutania Point West, Smuggler's Cove, and Nahku Bay. These are areas of high use during the recreation season and are areas where contact with water is most likely.

What are potential sources of bacteria?

Potential sources of bacteria within these recreation beach areas include sewage treatment facility, on-site septic systems, stormwater drain outfalls, small boat harbor, commercial vessel dock, cruise ship, ferry, and barge passages, wildlife, and pet feces.

Is the water safe to swim or fish in?

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

Please follow safe food handling recommendations and cook seafood to a minimum internal temperature of 145 degrees Fahrenheit to destroy any bacteria. Note that freezing alone does not kill pathogens.

What happens if there are elevated results?

If levels exceed state recreation standards, DEC will send a notification to stakeholders via the Alaska Beach Program Listserv, post on DEC social media accounts, and update the Alaska Beach Program webpage. The website has interactive maps showing advisories at specific beaches, monitoring reports, press releases, and other project resources. Temporary advisory signs may be posted at affected beaches.

Are you interested in receiving monitoring updates? You can sign up for the Beach Program Listserv by clicking the link at beaches.alaska.gov.

What can I do to help?

Beach users can discourage gulls and other birds from congregating on beaches by properly disposing of their fish (chop waste into small pieces and throw into fast moving out flowing water), pack out all waste, and use provided outhouses and dumpsters. Pick up after your pets. Do not discharge sewage from boats in harbors or nearshore. Learn about marine sanitation devices and how to properly manage sewage on your boat. Keep you and your family healthy by washing your hands after contacting water, and before eating and drinking. Finally, stay up to date on current water quality conditions by visiting the DEC Beach webpage.

For Additional Program Information

Skagway Area Program

Contact: Gretchen Augat

Phone: (907) 465-5023

Email: gretchen.augat@alaska.gov

Website: beaches.alaska.gov