



Highlights of [GAO-07-591](#), a report to Congressional Requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

Waterborne pathogens can contaminate water and sand at beaches and threaten human health. Under the Beaches Environmental Assessment and Coastal Health (BEACH) Act, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) developed limits on pathogens that states use to assess beach water quality. EPA can also provide grants to states to develop water quality monitoring and public notification programs.

GAO was asked to assess (1) the extent to which EPA implemented the BEACH Act including how it allocated grants to the states, (2) the monitoring and notification programs developed by Great Lakes states, and (3) the effect of the BEACH Act on water quality monitoring and contamination at Great Lakes beaches.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that EPA distribute grant funds in a way that reflects states' monitoring needs and help states improve the consistency of their monitoring and notification activities. In addition, Congress should consider providing EPA more flexibility to allow states to use BEACH Act grants to investigate and remediate contamination sources.

EPA generally agreed with GAO's recommendations but stated that states may resist making substantial changes to the funding formula because of their tight budgets.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-591.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Anu K. Mittal at (202) 512-3841 or mittala@gao.gov.

GREAT LAKES

EPA and States Have Made Progress in Implementing the BEACH Act, but Additional Actions Could Improve Public Health Protection

What GAO Found

EPA has taken steps to implement most of the provisions of the BEACH Act but has missed statutory deadlines for two critical requirements. While EPA has developed a national list of beaches and improved the uniformity of state water quality standards, it has not (1) completed the pathogen and human health studies required by 2003 or (2) published the new or revised water quality criteria for pathogens required by 2005. Moreover, the formula EPA has used to distribute approximately \$51 million in BEACH Act grants from 2001-2006 does not accurately reflect the monitoring needs of the states. This is because the formula emphasizes the length of the beach season more than the other factors—beach miles and beach use. These other factors vary widely among the states, can greatly influence the amount of monitoring a state needs to undertake, and can increase the public health risk.

All eight Great Lakes states have used BEACH Act grants to develop beach monitoring and public notification programs. However, because these programs vary among the states they may not provide consistent levels of public health protection within and across Great Lakes beaches. For example, GAO found that the states' monitoring and notification programs varied considerably in the frequency with which beaches were monitored, the monitoring methods used, and how the public was notified of potential health risks. For example, some states monitor their high-priority beaches as little as one or two times per week, while others monitor their high-priority beaches daily. In addition, when local officials review similar water quality results, some may choose to only issue a health advisory while others may choose to close the beach. According to state and local officials, these inconsistencies are in part due to the lack of adequate funding for their beach monitoring and notification programs.

The frequency of water quality monitoring has increased at Great Lakes beaches since the passage of the BEACH Act, helping states and localities to identify the scope of contamination. However, in most cases, the underlying causes of contamination remain unknown and unaddressed. This is because some state and local officials reported that they do not have the funds to investigate the source of the contamination or take actions to mitigate the problem, and EPA has concluded that BEACH Act grants generally may not be used for these purposes. For example, local officials at 67 percent of Great Lakes beaches reported that, when results of water quality testing indicated contamination at levels exceeding the applicable standards during the 2006 beach season, they did not know the source of the contamination, and only 14 percent reported that they had taken actions to address the sources of contamination. State and local officials indicated that an overall improvement in water quality throughout the Great Lakes will require long-term collaborative efforts to address the underlying causes of contamination, as well as increased funding.