



Highlights of [GAO-07-1043T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Transportation Safety, Infrastructure Security, and Water Quality, Committee on the Environment and Public Works, U.S. Senate

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) provides grants to states to develop water quality monitoring and public notification programs.

This statement summarizes the key findings of GAO's May 2007 report, *Great Lakes: EPA and the States Have Made Progress in Implementing the BEACH Act, but Additional Actions Could Improve Public Health Protection*. In this report GAO assessed (1) the extent to which EPA has implemented the Act's provisions, (2) concerns about EPA's BEACH Act grant allocation formula, and (3) described the experiences of the Great Lakes states in developing and implementing beach monitoring and notification programs using their grant funds.

What GAO Recommends

In the May 2007 report, GAO recommended that EPA distribute grant funds to better reflect states' monitoring needs and help states improve the consistency of their monitoring and notification activities; and the Congress consider providing more flexibility to allow states to use some BEACH Act funds to investigate and mitigate contamination sources. GAO is not making any additional recommendations in this statement.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-1043T.

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

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE BEACH ACT OF 2000

EPA and States Have Made Progress, but Additional Actions Could Improve Public Health Protection

What GAO Found

EPA has taken steps to implement most BEACH Act provisions 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. EPA stated that the required studies are ongoing, some studies were initiated in the summer of 2005, but the work was interrupted by Hurricane Katrina. EPA subsequently initiated two additional water studies in the summer of 2007. According to EPA, completion of the studies and development of the new criteria may take an additional 4 to 5 years. Further, although EPA has distributed approximately \$51 million in BEACH Act grants from 2001-2006, the formula EPA uses to make the grants does not accurately reflect the monitoring needs of the states. This occurs because the formula emphasizes the length of the beach season more than the other factors in the formula—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.

Thirty-four of the 35 eligible states have used BEACH Act grants to develop beach monitoring and public notification programs. Alaska is still in the process of developing its program. However, because state programs vary they may not provide consistent levels of public health protection nationwide. 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 Great Lakes 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 nationwide since passage of the Act, helping states and localities to identify the scope of contamination. However, in most cases, the underlying causes of contamination remain unknown. Some localities report 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.