

IT'S A SHORE THING – THE US EPA NEW ENGLAND BEACH STRATEGY

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Coastal beaches are among the most treasured natural resources in New England, but beach closures or advisories (“beach actions”) caused by high indicator bacteria levels prevent the public from taking advantage of these resources. In 2002 we announced the ***Clean New England Beaches: It’s A Shore Thing*** initiative to build on the basic requirements of the federal BEACH Act of 2000 – grants to states for assessment of pollution sources, standardized monitoring, and public notification at beaches – by working with state and local beach managers to identify and eliminate sources of bacteria causing chronic beach actions. Although virtually all of New England’s 800 coastal public beaches are assessed for pollution sources and the number of beaches monitored has nearly doubled, a significant number of beaches still experience chronic contamination problems. One hundred of New England’s beaches were posted ten or more times from 2004 to 2006.

In response, we refined our initiative in 2007 to focus on communities with the highest incidence of beach action days. By focusing on municipalities rather than individual beaches, we take advantage of the efficiencies of utilizing resources, evaluating permit requirements, considering infrastructure upgrades, and promoting financial opportunities for multiple beaches per municipality. In 2007 we met with state agencies to launch this strategy and received positive responses. As of November 2008, we have met with five communities – Salem, Provincetown, Quincy and Dartmouth, Massachusetts and Warwick, Rhode Island. We plan to assist each community with a “Beach Action Plan” to outline steps necessary to improve water quality and reduce beach actions. The plans will set priorities and define roles, responsibilities and commitments of each community and government agency.

Most of these communities are densely settled suburban environments with old infrastructure. Typically, the stormwater drainage system utilizes small coastal streams that have been culverted or strongly modified. Many of these streams discharge to or near small local beaches. As a result, stormwater runoff and illicit connections are a major cause of elevated bacteria levels and distinguishing between human and non-human sources of bacteria is a challenge. Although many communities have established municipal sewer systems, leaking septic systems and cesspools are suspected sources of elevated bacteria in unsewered areas. Trash, which attracts bird and rodents, and dog waste are major problems at some beaches and some communities have waged campaigns to educate the public about the impacts of dog waste on water quality.

As part of our strategy, we integrated our beach work within EPA New England’s stormwater permit and compliance programs. We reviewed annual stormwater permit

reports to determine whether communities are mapping outfalls, conducting an illicit detection program, or educating the public, as required. Remediation activities and/or extensive infrastructure improvements are costly and it is challenging to secure funding for these types of improvements. Thus, we feel that one of our successes has been to ensure that priority beach communities are given strong consideration in the Clean Water Act non-point source program. Although the ultimate goal of reducing beach actions remains elusive, we are making progress.

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