United States Environmental Protection Agency

Office of Water
EPA 823-R20-001
October 2020

EPA's Beach Report: 2019 Swimming Season

Introduction

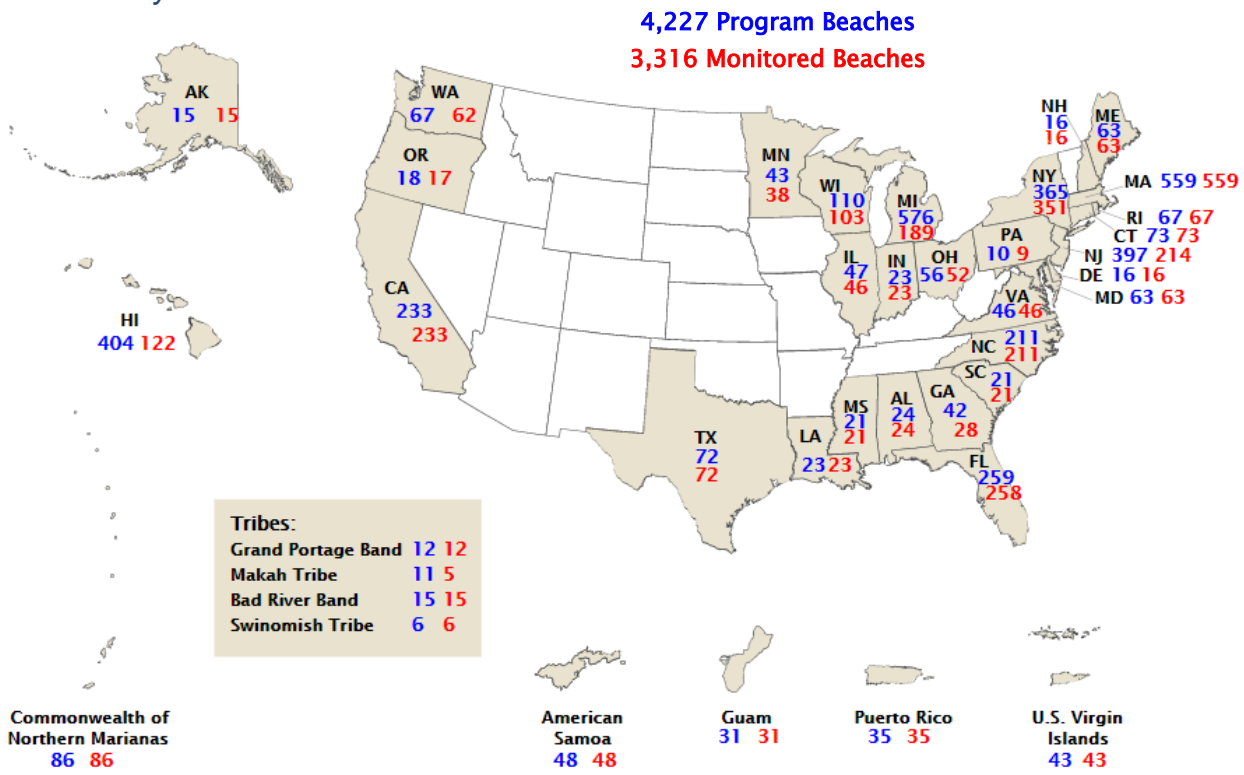
This report summarizes information that states, territories, and tribes with coastal and Great Lakes beaches submitted to EPA reporting beach advisories and closings for the 2019 swimming season. The information in this report covers January 1 through December 31, 2019, and includes data submitted to EPA as of July 29, 2020. A version of this report incorporating any updated data since this report was released can be generated at https://ofmpub.epa.gov/apex/beacon2/f?p=BEACON2:DNR.

The Beaches Environmental Assessment and Coastal Health (BEACH) Act of 2000 authorizes EPA to provide grants to eligible states, territories, and tribes to monitor their coastal recreational waters adjacent to beaches used by the public for attainment of applicable water quality standards for pathogens or pathogen indicators, such as bacteria, that indicate the possible presence of disease-causing pathogens and to notify the public when there is a potential risk to public health. EPA awarded nearly $9.3 million in such grants in 2018 for the 2019 swimming season. The BEACH Act requires that grant recipients report their coastal recreational waters monitoring and notification data to EPA and that EPA maintain a publicly accessible electronic database of those data. This report is based on those data. Information on grouped or individual jurisdictions or beaches can be found at https://watersgeo.epa.gov/BEACON2/about.html.

2019 Swimming Season Results

States, territories, and tribes take water samples to monitor the water at swimming beaches to see if levels of specific indicator bacteria (e.g., enterococci) exceed the water quality standards that apply to that water. "Program beaches" have, at minimum, a program to notify the public if swimming in the coastal water is unsafe, and most also have a program to routinely monitor water quality. In 2019, 78 percent of coastal and Great Lakes program beaches in the United States were monitored for pathogens or pathogen indicators. Chart 1 shows the number of beaches that were monitored and the number of program beaches in each state, territory, and tribe in 2019. When monitoring results show exceedances of water quality standards for pathogens or pathogen indicators, states, territories, and tribes either issue a beach advisory that warns people of possible risks of swimming or a beach closing that closes the beach to public swimming. The states and local agencies that do not routinely monitor water quality use models or other policies (e.g., advisory after a certain amount of rainfall) as a basis for issuing notification actions at beaches. These advisories or closings typically stay in effect until monitoring shows that levels of pathogens or pathogen indicators comply with applicable water quality standards.

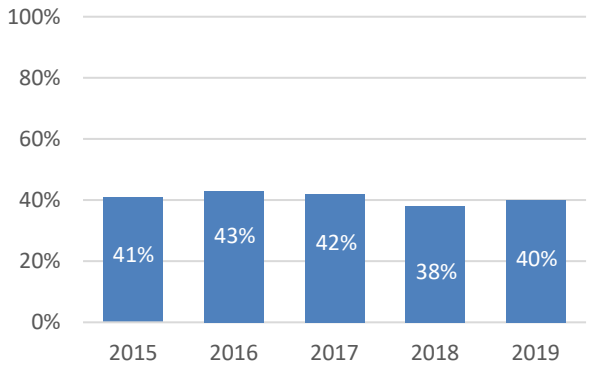
Chart 1: Number of total and monitored coastal and Great Lake program beaches by state/territory/tribe in 2019



How many beaches had notification actions?

In 2019, 40 percent of the nation's monitored beaches (1,342 out of 3,316) had at least one advisory or closing. Chart 2 shows the percent of monitored beaches nationwide with one or more advisories or closings in years 2015 through 2019.

Chart 2: Percent of nation's monitored beaches with one or more notification actions

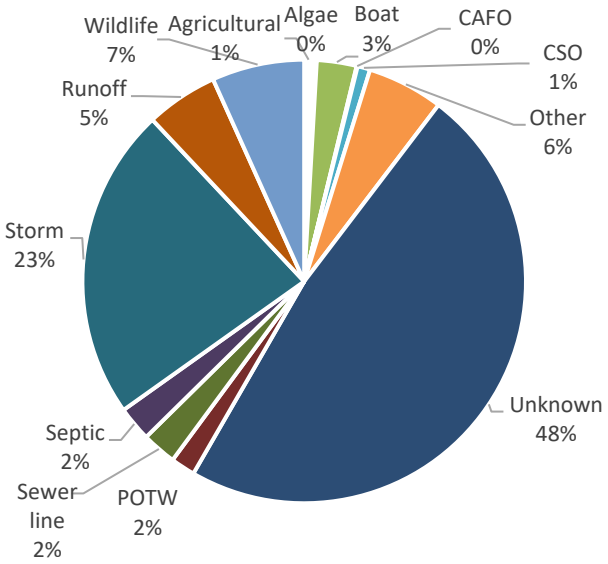


What are the possible pollution sources causing notification actions?

Beach advisories and closings can result from a variety of pollution sources: stormwater runoff after rainfall; pet and wildlife waste; waste from boats; leaking septic systems; malfunctions at wastewater treatment plants or broken sewer lines; overflows from sewer systems; or harmful algal blooms. To help minimize the risk to beachgoers, EPA is, for example, helping communities improve sewage treatment plants and reduce adverse impacts from rainfall as much as possible by providing water infrastructure investment loans.

States, territories, and tribes reported the possible sources of pollution shown in Chart 3 that resulted in beach advisories or closings or were identified in beach surveys in 2019.

Chart 3: Reported possible sources of pollution in 2019

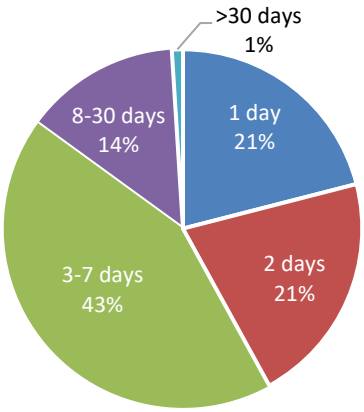


(Note: Some percentages are showing as 0% because only whole numbers are being shown.)

How many notification actions were issued and how long did they last?

States, territories, and tribes issued 9,796 beach notification actions (i.e., advisories or closings) during the 2019 swimming season. An advisory or closing is typically removed when follow-up water quality monitoring shows that pathogens or pathogen indicators comply with applicable water quality standards. For 85 percent of the notification actions in 2019, coastal recreational waters no longer exceeded applicable water quality standards and beaches were deemed safe for swimming within a week (Chart 4). In 2019, 21 percent of the notification actions lasted only one day, and 21 percent ended between one and two days.

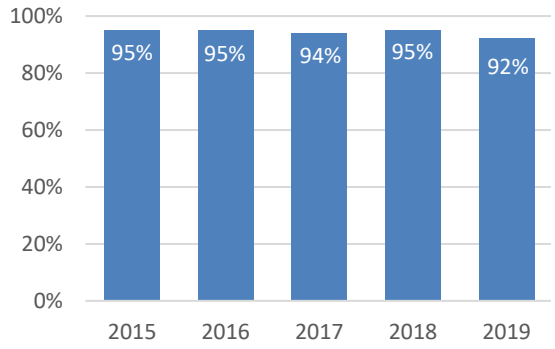
Chart 4: Duration of beach notification actions in 2019



What percentage of days were beaches open and safe for swimming?

Monitored beaches on U.S. coasts and along the Great Lakes were open and safe for swimming 92 percent of the time in 2019. EPA calculates the total available beach days and the number of beach days with advisories or closings to better track trends over time. To calculate total available beach days, EPA adds the length of the beach season (in days) for every monitored beach in each state, territory, and tribe. For 2019, EPA determined that 598,856 beach days were associated with the swimming seasons of 3,316 beaches with monitoring programs. Notification actions were reported on 47,768 days out of those 598,856 beach days. Chart 5 shows the percentage of beach days that the nation's monitored beaches were open and without any advisories in years 2015 through 2019.

Chart 5: Percent of days the nation's monitored beaches were open and safe for swimming



Where Can I Find More Information?

To find out more about what you can do to help protect beaches, visit https://www.epa.gov/beaches/act-beach.

To find out more about what affects beach health, visit https://www.epa.gov/beaches/learn-what-affects-beach-health.

For general information about beaches, visit https://www.epa.gov/beaches.

For current information about a specific beach, visit https://www.epa.gov/beaches/state-territorial-tribal-and-epa-beach-program-contacts.

For beach information that states, territories, and tribes have reported to EPA, visit http://watersgeo.epa.gov/beacon2.