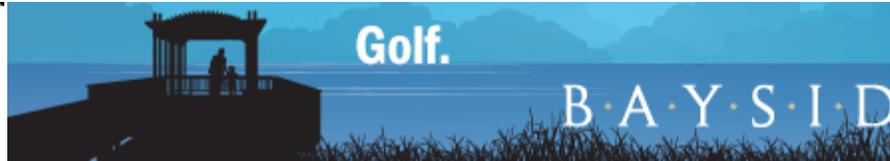


Coastal Point Minute

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Delaware beaches ranked No. 1 in water quality again

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By Laura Walter
Staff Reporter

Delaware has always been the First State, and its beaches come in first, too. In addition to having top water quality conditions, Delaware's own Rehoboth and Dewey beaches were recently again named superstar beaches for 2012 by the National Resources Defense Council (NRDC), the non-partisan international environmental group that annually assesses all beaches in 30 coastal states.

The NRDC Annual Beach Report, "A Guide to Water Quality at Vacation Beaches," revealed that, in 2012, Delaware took 559 water samples at 24 sites, a step up from 401 samples the year before.

Rehoboth Beach had Delaware's only water quality advisory day in 2012. The advisory lasted 24 hours or less and was probably the result of very heavy rain, according to the report. It returned to normal by the next reading.

"What does happen, after a very, very heavy rainfall, there can be an increased chance that runoff can come from land [into the ocean]," said Michael Bott, environmental scientist for the Division of Watershed Stewardship. The jump in readings came from an unknown source, so anything from pollution to animal waste could cause it.

The Delaware Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control aims to protect the health of swimmers through the Recreational Water Program. Water samples are collected from May to September near guarded recreational beaches, to identify all actual and potential sources of pollution. Water samples are analyzed to determine the levels of Enterococci bacteria in recreational waters. Enterococcus is one of several indicator organisms that signal the presence of potentially harmful bacteria and viruses.

"The indicator bacteria can be from gulls or any warm-blooded animal," Bott said.

The 2012 results were also an improvement from 2011, which featured six closing/advisory days. Unknown contamination sources had caused two days of advisories each at the Delaware Bay shorelines of Broadkill Beach, Prime Hook and Slaughter Beach.

In 2010, stormwater runoff and other unknown sources caused 86 beach closure/advisory days.

A permanent caution regarding swimming in the Inland Bays remains in place. The

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Inland Bays suffer from nutrient pollution from failing septic systems, fertilizers and other sources. Water in the bays is slow to flush out, so pollutants linger in the Indian River Bay, Rehoboth Bay and Little Assawoman Bay.

For current information about swimming advisories, call the free, 24-hour "Beach Hotline" at 1 (800) 922-WAVE or visit <http://apps.dnrec.state.de.us/RecWater> to join the email notification list.

In accordance with its geography, Delaware is on the smaller side of sampling. Massachusetts tests a whopping 601 beaches, and Michigan took more than 13,000 samples. The Great Lakes had the highest exceedance rate (10 percent), compared to the Delmarva region at 3 percent.

The report noted that some states have higher exceedance rates because they're playing it safe. They might immediately post beach advisories before awaiting a second opinion on a high reading, or they test more frequently near suspected pollution sources.

Nationwide, the NRDC report found a total of 20,120 days were marred by beach closings and advisories (which lasted six consecutive weeks or less). That is a 14 percent decrease from 2011, likely caused by the drier beach season in much of the continental U.S. and Hawaii, according to the report.

More than 80 percent of all closings and advisories were due to bacteria levels in beach water exceeding public health standards, usually indicating the presence of human or animal waste in the water. The national exceedance rate has fluctuated between 7 and 8 percent each year since NRDC began tracing data in 2005.

The largest known source of pollution was stormwater runoff, which was blamed for 28 percent of closing/advisory days, although 63 percent of closings were attributed to unknown sources of pollution. Another 10 percent were attributed to sewage spills and overflows.

NRDC was unsatisfied with EPA's new beach water standards and encourages incentives for cities to implement green infrastructure. Green roofs, porous pavement, rain gardens and street plantings can prevent the estimated 10 trillion gallons of untreated rainwater that flush toxins into drains leading to the ocean.

The EPA estimated that up to 3.5 million people became ill from contact with raw sewage from sanitary sewer overflows each year, which can lead to everything from stomach flu or pinkeye to respiratory infections or meningitis, especially for children who dive under the waves and swallow more water.

NRDC issued star ratings to 200 popular beaches around the country. The star system recognizes popular beaches for exceptionally low violation rates and strong testing and safety practices. Criteria include testing more than once a week, notifying the public as soon as tests reveal bacterial levels violating health standards, and posting closings and advisories both online and at the beach. In 2012, 13 beaches received a five-star rating, including Rehoboth, Dewey and Ocean City, Md.

Maryland's testing was more varied, ranging from monthly to twice weekly. In 2012 in Maryland, the beaches with the highest percent exceedance rates were located along the Chesapeake Bay, including Sandy Point State Park. Of the 10 Worcester County sites tested, five Ocean City sites had 4 percent exceedance rates but no closures/advisories.

Delaware attracts more than 7 million visitors each year, many of them beach-bound. According to the Delaware Sea Grant College Program at the University of Delaware, the state's coastal economy generates \$6.9 billion annually, including \$711 million in tax revenue, and supports 59,000 jobs. That's more than 10 percent of the state's total

employment, taxes and business production.

After Hurricane Sandy washed away much of the beach sand in 2012, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers recently received \$30 million in federal funding to replenish Delaware beaches.

“Protecting our beautiful coastline is about more than just pumping sand onto the beach; it’s about pumping money into the economy, keeping our beaches healthy, and protecting buildings and infrastructure from coastal storms,” said Sen. Chris Coons in a DNREC statement. “I am proud to live in a state ranked No. 1 for beach water quality, and I am pleased the Congressional delegation secured funding for beach renourishment through the federal Emergency Supplemental Appropriations Act of 2010.”

“Delaware is emerging as the most pristine beach destination in the nation,” said DNREC Secretary Collin O’Mara. “By serving as stewards of our treasured natural resources, we can protect this advantage for years to come.”

Visit www.nrdc.org/water/oceans/ttw to read the entire water quality report.