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Contact: Kate Kiely, kkiely@nrdc.org or 212-727-4592

Report: Nearly 2,000 Beach Closings & Advisories Issued in New York & New Jersey Last Summer

Most Beaches Re-Opened After Hurricane Sandy, Nine Beaches Remain Closed

NEW YORK (June 26, 2013) – There were nearly 2,000 closings or advisories issued at New York and New Jersey beaches combined last summer because of polluted water or threat of contamination, and nine beaches in the area remain closed this year as a result of Hurricane Sandy, according to the Natural Resources Defense Council’s 23rd annual beachwater quality report released today.

“From the Jersey Shore, to New York City’s beaches and the Hamptons, no one wants to go swimming in sewage on their summer vacation,” said NRDC senior attorney Lawrence Levine. “Polluted water is not only bad for people’s health, but bad for local business in beach communities. By tackling contamination at its source—stormwater runoff—we can help prevent a trip to the shore from turning into a trip to the doctor.”

In its 23rd year, NRDC’s annual report – *Testing the Waters: A Guide to Water Quality at Vacation Beaches* – confirms that last year, our nation’s beachwater continued to suffer from serious contamination and pollutants by human and animal waste. The report analyzes government data on beachwater testing results from 2012 at more than 3,000 beach testing locations nationwide, providing information on water quality, as well as beach closings and swimming advisories. A zip code-searchable map of the results is available here: <http://www.nrdc.org/beaches>.

In New York and New Jersey, there were 1,871 closing and advisory days total between the two states last year, hovering near 2,000 days for the second year in a row. Consistent with past years, the most common known cause of contamination was stormwater runoff, and sewage overflows were also often a contributor. Additionally, lingering damage from Hurricane Sandy has caused nine area beaches to remain closed. The majority are expected to reopen later this season, and only one is expected to be closed indefinitely.

The report provides a 5-star rating guide to 200 of the nation’s popular beaches, evaluating them for water quality and best practices for testing and public notification. This year, the report awards 13 beaches with a “Superstar” 5-star rating for exceptional water quality over the past five years, as well as highlights the top 11 “Repeat Offenders,” which repeatedly exhibit chronically high bacteria counts.

No beaches in New York or New Jersey were awarded a “Superstar” rating in this year’s report, but 14 beaches received 4-stars. In New Jersey, this includes one beach in Monmouth County—*7th Ave. (Belmar)*, one beach in Ocean County—*Broadway (Pt Pleasant Beach)*, three beaches in Atlantic County—*15th St South (Brigantine)*, *Chelsea (Atlantic City)* and *Washington (Margate)*, and five beaches in Cape May County—*40th St. (Avalon)*, *40th St (Sea Isle City)*, *96th St. (Stone Harbor)*, *Webster (Upper Township)*, and *Orchid (Wildwood Crest)*. In New York, this includes two beaches in Brooklyn—*Coney Island Beach (Brighton 6th – Ocean Parkway)* and *Coney Island Beach (Ocean Parkway – W. 8th)*, one beach in Queens—*Rockaway Beach (116th St. to 126th)*, and one beach in Nassau County—*Long Beach City*.

Two area beaches were included on the nationwide “Repeat Offender” list, indicating persistent contamination problems over the last five years. This includes New Jersey’s *Beachwood Beach* in Ocean County, and New York’s *Ontario Beach* in Monroe County. *Beachwood Beach*, however, is taking steps to identify how to remedy its ongoing pollution problem (details to follow).

This year, *Testing the Waters* highlights two critical actions that the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) can take to protect people at the beach. First, because polluted runoff is the biggest known source of beachwater pollution, EPA should reform and rigorously enforce the national requirements that govern sources of polluted stormwater to ensure that runoff is controlled using innovative green infrastructure solutions. Second, EPA should reconsider its new recreational beachwater quality criteria, which leave beachgoers inadequately protected and unnecessarily exposed to bacteria, viruses, and parasites that can make them sick.

More information on the impacts of Hurricane Sandy and details on the regional findings follows. **For the national findings, go to <http://www.nrdc.org/media/ttw2013/press-resource.asp>.**

HURRICANE SANDY

Hurricane Sandy was one of the largest storms on record in the northeastern region of the U.S. Killing 159 people and causing an estimated \$70 billion in damage in eight states, it was the most destructive hurricane of the 2012 hurricane season, and the second-costliest in U.S. history, behind only Hurricane Katrina.

Floods from the storm also overwhelmed the region's sewage treatment plants, dumping 11 billion gallons of sewage into the Mid-Atlantic's rivers, bays, canals, city streets and, ultimately, beaches. For perspective, this amount of waste could cover all of Central Park, with a layer of sewage 41 feet high, and is more than 50 times the amount of oil spilled in the BP disaster in the Gulf of Mexico three years ago.

Approximately 93% of the volume of sewage overflows occurred in New York (47%) and New Jersey (46%) alone.

The storm hit after the close of the 2012 beach season for Northeast and Mid-Atlantic, so the public health threat from this sewage in the water did not impact many swimmers. However, it wreaked havoc on dunes, sand, boardwalks and other beach infrastructure. Fortunately, most beaches in the region have made repairs in time to reopen for the 2013 season. However, nine beaches total in New York and New Jersey remain closed.

“With so many still reeling from Hurricane Sandy, we must learn from this experience and rebuild stronger,” said Levine. “We need to protect vulnerable sewer and wastewater infrastructure to keep pollution from pouring into our waterways in future storms, large or small.”

In **New Jersey**, the coastline was severely damaged by the hurricane. It destroyed dunes, washed away homes, and tore up important infrastructure. Floods also overwhelmed sewage treatment plants and flushed more than 5 billion gallons of untreated and partially treated sewage into New Jersey waterways. Newark's Passaic Valley Sewerage Commission treatment plant was the source of the largest sewage spill region-wide as a result of the storm. The facility dumped more than 800 million gallons of untreated sewage into Newark Bay for a week after the storm, and an additional 3 billion gallons of partially treated sewage in the following two weeks while repairs were being made.

While most beaches have been reopened, the state reports that, as of mid-June, three Ocean County beaches and two Monmouth County beaches are still closed. *Berkeley Island beach*, part of the Ocean County Park System, is closed indefinitely due to structural damage and a washed out road. Also in Ocean County, *North Avenue ocean beach in Ortley Beach (Toms River Township)* and *7th Avenue Beach (Brick Township)* both have ongoing construction to repair the beaches, but plan to open some time this season. In Monmouth County, *Ideal Beach* and *Thompson Avenue beach* in Middletown will not open due to damage from the storm. The town is waiting for beach replenishment along its shoreline.

In May, the EPA announced it will provide New Jersey with \$229 million in federal grant funds for improvements to wastewater and drinking water treatment facilities impacted by Sandy, in order to reduce the risk of flood damage and future storm damage. This will help defray the estimated \$2.7 billion it will take to repair the damage to sewage treatment plants caused by the storm.

New York declared a statewide emergency due to the storm, with parts of Long Island evacuated and widespread power outages throughout the New York metropolitan region. As a result of not only flooding and sewage overflows, but also severely damaged treatment plants and pumping stations, the storm dumped more than 5 billion gallons of untreated and partially treated sewage into New York's waters.

The damaged treatment plants continued to release untreated or partially treated sewage into local waterways for weeks after the storm. For example, nearly 50 million gallons of untreated sewage came from one Yonkers treatment plant during Sandy, with another 1.2 billion gallons of partially treated sewage flowing from the plant in the four weeks after the storm passed. In Long Island, the Bay Park treatment plant released 100 million gallons of untreated sewage into Hewlett Bay during the 44 hours the plant was offline; it released another 2.2 billion gallons of partially treated sewage over the next 44 days, until it was fully restored.

The state reports that, as of mid-June, most beaches have been reopened but four are still closed, all of which are located in Suffolk County. Those beaches are: *West Islip*, which is opening late due to repairs to their bathroom facility but expects to open before July 4th, *Beech Road Beach* and *Woodhull Landing Beach*, which are both currently rebuilding access stairs and will likely open later in season, and *Sayville Beach*, where swimming will be prohibited throughout 2013 and a lost bathroom building will be rebuilt at a later date.

It is estimated that it will cost New York \$2 billion to repair the damage Sandy caused to sewage treatment plants in the state. Under the federal Sandy relief bill, New York received \$340 million in grants from EPA for improvements to wastewater and drinking water treatment facilities impacted by the storm, in order to reduce the risk of future flood and storm damage. The state also said it will establish a \$900 million fund to construct floodwalls, flood proofing and emergency disinfection at wastewater treatment plants in the 100-year and 500-year flood zone in the counties affected by Sandy, to help harden facilities that are particularly vulnerable to storm surge and flooding.

Additionally, Mayor Bloomberg announced a climate change resiliency plan earlier this month that identifies a range of improvements it plans to make at wastewater treatment facilities and pumping stations. These upgrades—such as raising or flood-proofing critical equipment, constructing barriers, and installing backup power supplies—are designed to further protect these facilities from flood damage and to improve the reliability of backup power supplies in future storms.

NEW YORK FINDINGS – 2012:

In New York State, there were 1,626 closing and advisory days last year at both coastal and Great Lakes beaches, a slight decrease from 1,841 days in 2011. The major reason for that small drop is that three major events accounted for a significant number of days in 2011 – Hurricane Irene, a separate record-breaking 7.7-inch rainstorm in August, and a fire that disabled a New York City sewage treatment plant for several days. This region is expected to see more frequent and intense storms as a result of climate change in coming years, which could result in an increase of beach closings and advisories.

The large majority (68%) of closings/advisories in 2012 were preemptive due to heavy rainfall, while testing results revealing bacterial contamination were responsible for most other closings/advisories (38%).

Additionally, there were extended closings at three beaches in the state last year: *Surf Club* in Westchester County was closed for 77 days due to consistently high bacteria levels attributed to stormwater runoff and other unknown sources; *Douglaston Homeowners Association* in Queens County was closed for 47 days due to consistently high bacteria levels attributed sewage from septic systems; and *Crescent Beach* in Nassau County was closed for 98 days due to consistently high bacteria levels, without a known source.

In New York, the percentage of samples violating health standards statewide decreased slightly to 9% in 2012

from 10% the previous year. New York ranked 22nd out of 30 states for the number of beachwater samples violating national standards in 2012.

The most common reported cause of contamination was stormwater runoff (89%), followed by sewage spills/leaks (8%), unknown contamination sources (7%), wildlife (3%), and other contamination sources (2%). (The total is more than 100% because more than one contamination source is sometimes reported.)

The county with the highest percentage of water samples violating health standards was Monroe County (28%), followed by Chautauqua (18%), Bronx (15%), Westchester (14%), Niagara (14%), Wayne (13%), and Jefferson (11%). The county with the least violations of health standards was Oswego (1%). The remaining counties had the following results: Richmond (8%), Queens (7%), Suffolk (7%), Erie (6%), Nassau (6%), Cayuga (5%), Kings (5%).

The specific beaches with the highest percentage of water samples violating health standards were *Shore Acres Club* in Westchester County (50%), *Main Street Beach* in Chautauqua County (35%), *Surf Club* in Westchester County (35%), *Ontario Beach* in Monroe County (33%), *Hamlin Beach – Area 4* in Monroe County (30%), and *Wright Park –East/West* in Chautauqua County (30%).

New York City has both public and private beaches. Its public beaches see the vast majority of the city's beachgoers every year.

In New York City, many private beaches had very high health standard violation rates (at least 15%). These were: in **Queens**, *Douglaston Homeowners Association* (19%) and in the **Bronx**, *White Cross Fishing Club* (23%), *American Turners* (22%), *Trinity Danish Young People's Society* (22%), *Morris Yacht and Beach Club* (17%), *West Fordham Street Association* (17%) and *Danish American Beach Club* (16%).

Though health standard violation rates at public beaches in New York City peaked much lower than private beaches, the poorest performers (with at least 5% of samples exceeding standards) were: in **Staten Island**, *South Beach* (5%), *Cedar Grove* (5%), *Midland Beach* (5%) and *Wolfe's Pond Park* (15%); in **Brooklyn**, *Manhattan Beach* (7%) and the stretch of *Coney Island Beach from W. 8th St to Pier* (5%), from *W. 16th – 27th* (5%) and from *W. 28th – W. 37th St.* (5%); in the **Bronx**, *Orchard Beach* (7%).

All the remaining public beaches in New York City that are not listed above (11 in total) stood out for perfect water quality testing results, meaning all samples taken in 2011 met health standards (for a 0% violation rate). These include three of six segments of *Coney Island* in **Brooklyn**, and all eight segments of *Rockaway Beach* in **Queens**. Two private beaches also had perfect results: *Kingsborough Community College* in **Brooklyn**, and one of the two beach segments at *Breezy Point (at Reid Avenue)* in **Queens**.

In spring 2012, New York City and state finalized a plan that will help tackle one of the city's biggest sources of water pollution: its 30 billion gallon/year sewage overflow problem. The plan will use green infrastructure projects – such as porous pavement, green roofs, sidewalk tree boxes, and other increased green space – to reduce the amount of rainfall that reaches the city's sewer system where it can trigger overflows when facilities are overloaded (this can occur after just one-tenth of an inch of rain). As of this month, the city has completed construction of three Neighborhood Demonstration Areas, with dozens of green infrastructure installations in each. Together, they are projected to collect more than 7 million gallons of stormwater runoff a year, keeping it out of the sewer system where it can trigger overflows. Citywide, at least 119 roadside green infrastructure installations have been built; the city plans to rapidly accelerate construction of similar projects, with thousands more expected in the next couple of years.

NEW JERSEY FINDINGS – 2012:

In New Jersey, there were 245 closing and advisory days last year, an 87% increase from 131 days in 2011. The dramatic increase is likely due to two factors. First, *Long Beach Island*'s health officer closed 103 beaches there for one day in order to protect public health while clearing a wash up of floating debris, including at least 50 syringes, plastics, and wood debris. The state reports that sewer overflows in the northern part of the state, which followed heavy rains the previous week, are the likely source of this trash. Second, the Ocean County Health Department began issuing advisories for the first time, which increased the total number of advisories in New Jersey from previous years.

The large majority of closings and advisories (69%) were pre-emptive last year, with 25% preemptive due to heavy rainfall, 3% preemptive due known sewage spills or leaks, and 41% were preemptive due to other reasons (primarily the incident of floating debris in *Long Beach Island*). Another 31% were due to monitoring that revealed elevated bacteria levels. There were no extended or permanent events in 2012.

In New Jersey, 4% of beachwater samples violated national standards in 2012, a slight increase from 3% in 2011. New Jersey ranked 7th in the nation for beachwater quality. Stormwater runoff was responsible for 25% of beachwater contamination, and sewage spills accounted for 3%. The state reported that 30% were from unknown sources and 42% were from "other" sources not specified in the state's reports.

The county with the highest percentage of water samples violating health standards was Ocean County (7%), while the lowest was Cape May (2%). The remaining counties had the following results: Atlantic (3%) and Monmouth (3%).

The specific beaches with the highest percentage of water samples violating health standards were all located in Ocean County, and included *Beachwood Beach (Beachwood)* (35%), *Avon Road in Pine Beach (Pine Beach)* (29%), *East Beachwood Beach West (Beachwood Boro)* (27%), *West Beachwood Beach West (Beachwood Boro)* (27%), and *Windward Beach (Brick)* (25%).

New Jersey is one of the few states that have tried out rapid tests for beachwater contamination, which provide day-of results, rather than 24 hours later like traditional contamination tests. In 2012, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection published results of a test run of rapid water contamination tests at four Ocean County bay beaches (*Windward Beach* in Brick Township, *Avon Road* in Pine Beach Borough, *Beachwood Beach* in Beachwood Borough and *Anglesea* in Ocean Gate Borough). The results found that the traditional methods and the rapid test method showed matching results the large majority of the time (82%), providing a reliable and more timely alternative.

More than 25% of the samples taken at *Beachwood Beach* have violated health standards every year since NRDC first began tracking water quality monitoring data in 2005. In 2012, the borough of Beachwood, along with county officials, began a project to track down sources of bacterial pollution, including sampling water quality at stormwater outfalls, improving mapping of the area's drainage system, and studying the movement of pollution along the shoreline in various weather conditions. While this study is ongoing, Beachwood has also enhanced its beach water quality sampling by taking additional samples after rain events, and has instituted a policy of closing the beach for 24 hours after any rain event of more than a quarter-inch over a 12-hour period. The borough and the county intend to use the results of the study to reduce identified pollution sources.

THE EVERGREEN SOLUTIONS – BOOSTING GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE:

Every year, more than 10 trillion gallons of untreated stormwater, including hundreds of billions of gallons of untreated sewage overflows, makes its way into America's waterways each year, according to the EPA. This contaminated discharge is the largest known source of beachwater pollution.

The best way to keep this pollution out of America's beachwater is to prevent it from the start by investing in

smarter, greener infrastructure on land, like porous pavement, green roofs, parks, roadside plantings and rain barrels. Green infrastructure addresses stormwater pollution by stopping rain where it falls, preventing the rain from carrying runoff from dirty streets to our beaches, and instead enabling it to evaporate or filter into the ground naturally.

Common-sense green infrastructure solutions keep stormwater from becoming wastewater and prevent sewage systems from overflowing. These techniques turn rainwater from a huge pollution liability into a plentiful, local water supply resource and they also beautify neighborhoods, cool and cleanse the air, reduce asthma and heat-related illnesses, save on heating and cooling energy costs, boost economies and support American jobs.

Already, scores of cities nationwide are embracing green infrastructure solutions. Now, our federal government should ensure that communities across the nation have the support to do the same. For the first time in many years, EPA is reexamining its nationwide requirements pertaining to sources of polluted runoff. These improvements will enable our cities to meet clean water goals more cost-effectively and will promote the use of green infrastructure techniques. EPA has a significant opportunity to clean up pollution at America's beaches by incentivizing the robust deployment of green infrastructure nationwide.

EPA RECREATIONAL WATER QUALITY CRITERIA ALLOW 1-IN-28 TO GET SICK:

Beachwater pollution nationwide causes a range of waterborne illnesses in swimmers including stomach flu, skin rashes, pinkeye, ear, nose and throat problems, dysentery, hepatitis, respiratory ailments, neurological disorders and other serious health problems. For senior citizens, small children and people with weak immune systems, the results can even be fatal.

EPA is responsible for ensuring that recreational waters are safe for people. One element of this responsibility is establishing and implementing federal standards (called "criteria") that adequately protect the public from contaminants in beachwater. Unfortunately, the agency's new allowable bacterial levels in recreational waters are, in part, even less protective than the 25-year-old standards they replaced.

Most egregiously, EPA's criteria fail to protect against single-day exposure to pathogens. The prior criteria triggered a violation after a single sample, but EPA now allows water quality to exceed the criteria up to 10 percent of the time without triggering a violation. This approach could mask a serious pollution problem and expose families to an unnecessary risk of illness. In addition, EPA has determined it is acceptable for 1 in 28 swimmers to become ill with gastrointestinal sicknesses such as diarrhea, nausea and vomiting, when swimming in recreational waters. This risk is unacceptably high and is not protective of public health. Additionally, the EPA does not adequately consider other health effects such as rashes and ear, eye, and sinus infections, all of which are commonly experienced by swimmers at U.S. beaches.

To address these flaws, the EPA must revise the level of acceptable risk so that it is protective of public health. A coalition of groups concerned about water quality, including NRDC, just last week filed a 60day notice of intent to sue EPA seeking to compel EPA to take action to protect beachgoers on any given day and to adopt criteria that adequately protect public health from all types of illnesses.

FOR MORE INFORMATION & MEDIA RESOURCES:

- Find a full list of media resources here: <http://www.nrdc.org/media/ttw2013/press-resource.asp>
- Full report and zip code-searchable map: <http://www.nrdc.org/beaches>
- The 5-star rating guide to 200 popular beaches: <http://www.nrdc.org/water/oceans/ttw/beach-ratings.asp>
- New York chapter: <http://www.nrdc.org/water/oceans/ttw/ny.asp>
- New Jersey chapter: <http://www.nrdc.org/water/oceans/ttw/nj.asp>

- Photos of “Superstar” beaches: http://www.flickr.com/photos/nrdc_media/sets/72157634313005170/
- Photos of “Repeat Offender” beaches: http://www.flickr.com/photos/nrdc_media/sets/72157634314266466/
- Broadcast-quality video of solutions for cleaner beachwater: <http://vimeo.com/album/262783>
- Tips for a safe trip to the beach: <http://www.nrdc.org/water/oceans/guide.asp>

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The Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) is an international nonprofit environmental organization with more than 1.4 million members and online activists. Since 1970, our lawyers, scientists, and other environmental specialists have worked to protect the world's natural resources, public health, and the environment. NRDC has offices in New York City, Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago, Livingston, Montana, and Beijing. Visit us at www.nrdc.org and follow us on Twitter @NRDC.