



PRESS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

JULY 29, 2009

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

RACHEL LORD, INLETKEEPER, 907.235.4068 X29
KATE SLUSARK, NRDC, 917-553-5099

MONITORING REPORTS SHOWS ALASKA WATER QUALITY REMAINS HIGH *But Beach Closing Days Nationwide Top 20,000 for Fourth Consecutive Year*

HOMER, AK – Bacteria levels in Alaska’s waters remains low, according to the 19th annual beach water quality report released today by the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC). Cook Inletkeeper provided data for the report through support from the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation’s Alaska Clean Water Actions program. However, water at other beaches nationwide was seriously polluted and jeopardized the health of swimmers last year with the number of closing and advisory days at ocean, bay and Great Lakes beaches reaching more than 20,000 for the fourth consecutive year, according to the NRDC report.

“Alaska is still fortunate to have relatively low population densities, and as a result, we’re not seeing the same impacts from bacterial pollution that we see in the Lower 48,” said Rachel Lord, Monitoring & Outreach Coordinator for Cook Inletkeeper. “But in Alaska, some locales – such as Homer – are doing a good job investing in their sewage treatment, where other areas in the state are not – and in those areas, we’re seeing the same lack of land use planning and lagging investments in sewage treatment infrastructure that have caused bacteria problems in other states, so we need to stay vigilant.”

Using data from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, NRDC’s report – *Testing the Waters: A Guide to Water Quality at Vacation Beaches* – confirms that nationwide, our beachwaters continue to suffer from serious contamination – including human and animal waste – that can make people sick.

While the report found a 10 percent decrease in closing and advisory days at beaches nationwide from 2007, it reveals this drop was the result of dry conditions in many parts of the country and decreased funding for water monitoring in some states last year, rather than a sign of large-scale improvement. In Alaska, long term bacterial monitoring at local beaches is in its early stages; Cook Inletkeeper has been collecting bacteria samples at Homer beaches with ADEC support for the past two years.

“When the rains return,” said Nancy Stoner, NRDC Water Program Co-Director, “so will pollution, forcing beaches to issue more closings and advisory days.”

For the full report, go to www.nrdc.org/beaches.

Nationally, 7 percent of beachwater samples violated health standards – indicating the presence of human or animal waste – showing no improvement from 2007 or 2006.

For the first time, the *Testing the Waters* report this year explores the effects of climate change on beachwater quality, revealing that climate change is expected to make pollution worse. The combined effects of temperature increases, and more frequent and intense rainstorms, will lead to increased stormwater runoff, sewer pollution and disease-causing pathogens in nearby waterways. Specifically, climate change is anticipated to influence the presence of pathogens that cause stomach flu, diarrhea and neurological problems in America's beachwater.

Beachwater pollution makes swimmers vulnerable to a range of waterborne illnesses 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 be fatal.

"Pollution from dirty stormwater runoff and sewage overflows continues to make its way to our beaches. This not only makes swimmers sick – it hurts coastal economies," Stoner said. "Americans should not suffer the consequences of contaminated beachwater. From contracting the flu or pink eye, to jeopardizing millions of jobs and billions of dollars that rely on clean coasts, there are serious consequences to inaction."

"As Alaska experiences increasing climate change, we're seeing increasing uses of our beaches for contact recreation," said Lord. "From newer pursuits, such as surfing and kiteboarding, to more traditional activities, such as clamming and kayaking, Alaskans are getting into our waters more and more. So we need to make sure our water quality and fish habitat remain healthy"

The best way to protect swimmers from beachwater pollution is to prevent it. Federal, state and local governments can make this a priority by requiring better controls on stormwater and sewage, the two largest known sources of beachwater pollution. A key solution is to utilize low impact development techniques in communities to retain and filter rainwater where it falls, letting it soak back into the ground rather than running off into waterways. This includes strategically placed rain gardens in yards, tree boxes on city sidewalks, green roofs that use absorbent vegetation on top of buildings, and permeable pavement that allows water to penetrate the material, instead of asphalt or concrete.

The Clean Coastal Environment and Public Health Act pending in Congress would provide money for more beachwater sampling and require use of faster testing methods so people get timely information about whether it is safe to swim. Additionally, the American Clean Energy and Security Act (ACES) that recently passed the House of Representatives will help communities prepare for further impacts of climate change on coastal communities such as flooding, sea level rise, increased stormwater pollution and sewer overflows, in addition to capping global warming pollution.

For tips for a safe trip to the beach this summer, go to: <http://www.nrdc.org/water/oceans/gttw.asp>.

###

The Natural Resources Defense Council is a national, nonprofit organization of scientists, lawyers and environmental specialists dedicated to protecting public health and the environment. Founded in 1970, NRDC has 1.2 million members and online activists, served from offices in New York, Washington, Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco and Beijing.

Cook Inletkeeper is a community-based nonprofit organization dedicated to protecting Alaska's Cook Inlet watershed and the life it sustains. Inletkeeper relies on research, monitoring, education and advocacy to give Alaskans the tools they need protect water and habitat quality for current and future generations. Inletkeeper has offices in Homer and Anchorage.