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Statement of Rep. Frank Pallone

House Subcommittee on Water Resources and Environment

Hearing on Reauthorization of the Beaches Environmental Assessment and Coastal Health Act

Thursday, July 12, 2007

I would first like to thank Chairwoman Bernice Johnson and Ranking Member Baker for conducting this important hearing. I would also like to specifically recognize Mr. Bishop from New York for his leadership on this issue. Our two offices have worked together in crafting what I believe is the most comprehensive beach protection legislation in our nation's history.

Across the country, American families and international tourists make over 2 billion trips each year to America's beaches to fish, sunbathe, boat, swim, surf, and bird-watch. Our coastal areas produce 85 percent of all US tourism dollars, fueling a huge economic engine.

Our nation's beaches are vital, not only to residents of our coastal states but also for countless visitors who come to visit each year. America's beaches are a tremendous resource for those who come to enjoy them, and they are a huge economic engine for our coastal states. In New Jersey alone, beaches are the primary driver of a tourism economy that provides nearly 500,000 jobs and generates \$36 billion in economic activities for the state each year.

All summer long thousands of people flock to New Jersey beaches to enjoy everything they have to offer. It is my intension to assure those beach goers that our nations beaches are clean and safe.

2000 BEACH ACT

And thanks to the BEACH Act, a law that I helped to author back in 2000, we have made major strides over the last six years. The BEACH Act of 2000 helped us improve water quality testing and monitoring at beaches across the country, which is critical to protecting the health of beachgoers.

The Act had three provisions: requiring states to adopt current EPA water quality criteria to protect beachgoers from getting sick; requiring the EPA to update these water quality criteria, with new science and technologies to provide better, faster water testing; and providing grants to states to implement coastal water monitoring programs.

New Jersey used some of this grant money to become the first state in the nation to launch a real-time website that notifies beachgoers of the state of our beaches.

THE BEACH PROTECTION ACT

Despite all the strong steps that coastal states and our nation have taken since the BEACH Act was signed into law, this Act can still be improved, and that's what Mr. Bishop and I had in mind when we introduced the BEACH Protection Act of 2007.

H.R. 2537, is a bill that will help ensure that beachgoers throughout the country can surf, swim, and play on clean and safe beaches.

This legislation not only reauthorizes the BEACH Act grants to states through 2012, but it also doubles the annual grant levels from \$30 million under the old authorization to a new level of \$60 million annually.

It also expands the scope of BEACH Act grants, from water quality monitoring and notification, to also include pollution source tracking and prevention efforts.

More importantly, this legislation goes further on environmental standards than any before by requiring tougher standards for beach water quality testing and communication.

The bill requires that beach water quality violations are disclosed not only to the public, but to all relevant state agencies with beach water pollution authority.

RAPID TESTING METHODS

The Beach Protection Act mandates the use of rapid testing methods by requiring the EPA to approve the use of rapid testing methods that detect bathing water contamination in 2 hours or less. Grantees must use those methods within one year of approval.

This is something that I have been advocating for the last several years. Current water quality monitoring tests, like those used in New Jersey, only test for bacteria levels and take 24 to 48 hours to produce reliable results. During this time many beachgoers can be unknowingly exposed to harmful pathogens. More immediate results would prevent beaches from remaining open when high levels of bacteria are found.

We are requiring each state receiving BEACH Act grants to:

Implement measures for tracking and identifying sources of beachwater pollution;
Create a public online database for each beach with relevant pollution and closure information posted; and

Ensure that closures or advisories are issued shortly after the state finds coastal waters out of compliance with water quality standards (within 24 hours of failed water quality test).

We are also holding states accountable by requiring the EPA Administrator to do annual reviews of grantees' compliance with BEACH Act process requirements. Grantees have one year to comply with the new environmental standards, or they will be required to pay at least a 50 percent match for their grant until they come back into compliance.

Mr. Chairman, protecting our coasts and oceans is critical to the local economies that depend on them for billions in tourism and recreation revenues. The BEACH Protection Act is certainly a step in the right direction.

Once again, I would like to thank the Chairman and the Ranking member for holding this hearing and for their leadership on this important issue. I look forward to working with my colleagues on protecting New Jersey's, and our nations, beaches for years to come.