April 18, 2013

Re: Bathing Beach Pre-Operational Inspections and Assessments

Dear Mayor, Administrator, and Health Official:

As a result of Super Storm Sandy, the beach profile was significantly altered, and substantial amounts of debris entered waterways. For that reason, this year's pre-operational assessment of bathing beaches and lifeguard training is more essential than ever. The New Jersey Sanitary Code Chapter IX Public Recreational Bathing at N.J.A.C. 8:26 require a pre-operational assessment for bathing beaches before a bathing beach opens each year. A pre-operational assessment shall be conducted of the bathing beach and the surrounding areas and shall include a field investigation of the bathing and surrounding areas to identify physical hazards. The intent of the rule is to identify hazards or debris that could cause injury or entrapment and to identify any new potential sources of pollution. The pre-operational assessment is to be completed by the owner or operator, which in the case of most New Jersey beaches is the municipality. Records of the pre-operational assessment need to be maintained and all changes from year to year at the bathing beach documented.

In light of the circumstances, the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) is assisting in this pre-operational assessment of bathing areas beyond the low tide line. DEP has conducted an initial helicopter surveillance flyover of the NJ coastline to identify submerged debris and will conduct several additional flyovers prior to the opening of beach season. If debris is observed during a coastal flight, DEP will contact the municipality with coordinates and/or street-end location. Depending on the type of debris observed, the municipality may remove it, or mark its location with a buoy if it cannot be removed. All debris that cannot be removed may be reported to the DEP Hotline at: 1-877-WARN-DEP (1-877-927-6337). DEP has contracted for the removal of large storm-related wet debris. However, the contractor may not be able to reach and remove all debris prior to beach season. In such cases, bathing beaches may need to be temporarily moved in order to avoid marked debris. DEP Debris Management Updates can be found at: http://www.nj.gov/dep/special/hurricane-sandy/wwdebris.htm. All accessible debris located above the low tide line shall be removed by the municipality. It is also important to be cautious of additional smaller hazards that may be present such as nails.

Municipalities shall also conduct a physical investigation for debris in the bathing area as part of the pre-operational assessment. This may include having lifeguards or other appropriate
employees walk in the swimming area in a grid pattern looking for debris or hazards or swimming the area. It is important that due to the special circumstances this year, that every effort is made to ensure public health and safety.

Lifeguard training is more critical than ever this year. Specific training on possible risks related to the aftermath of Sandy will better prepare and equip lifeguards to handle unique situations. The initial helicopter surveillance flyover showed a significantly changed beach profile. Many areas have an especially steep drop at the shallow edge of the bathing beach and a sand bar beyond the drop-off. These conditions may lead to bathers going from waist deep to overhead quickly and could require more rescues than in the past. Dangerous "shore breaks" and rip currents could also increase this year due to the change in beach profile. The potential risk for head, neck and back injuries and broken bones should be communicated to beach managers and lifeguards. Lifeguards should be aware that beach conditions and debris locations can change rapidly. After unusually high tides and coastal storms, debris may refloat and be deposited in bathing areas where it did not previously exist. As a result, lifeguards should conduct assessments of their bathing areas frequently (daily prior to opening for the day, during daily swims, etc.) to be alert to any changes.

In addition, beach managers and lifeguards should be prepared to respond to inquiries from the public about swimming safety and water quality. It is important for lifeguards, municipalities, health authorities, and the State to be able to respond with a positive and consistent message. Both the DOH and DEP will be posting a message on beach safety on our beach webpages (www.nj.gov/health/phss, www.njbeaches.org). We encourage all health authorities, municipalities, beach patrols, lifeguard certification agencies and surfrider (http://jerseyshore.surfrider.org/) to post similar information on their websites. The message will report the efforts of the State, local health authorities, municipalities and beach patrols to remove debris and hazards from beaches and bathing areas to make them as safe as possible for the public. Pre-season water quality monitoring indicates that water quality is within the standard at all monitored locations and sampling will continue throughout the season. This data can be found at: http://www.nj.gov/dep/beaches/monitoring_results.htm, and post Hurricane Sandy DEP Marine Water Monitoring water quality data can be found at: http://www.state.nj.us/dep/wms/bmw/sandy.html. We ask that all beach goers use common sense and caution while on beaches or swimming. If hazards or unusual items are observed, they should be reported to the 24-hour DEP Hotline at: 1-877-WARN-DEP (1-877-927-6337).

If you have any questions or concerns regarding pre-operational inspections or assessments, please contact Loel Muetter, Program Supervisor, Public Health Sanitation and Safety Program, New Jersey Department of Health, 609-826-4941 or Bruce Friedman, Chief, Bureau of Marine Water Monitoring, DEP, 609-748-2000.

Sincerely,

Jill Lipoti

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