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Bathing season opened New directive for better protection of bathers

The bathing waters in Germany were monitored for the first time during the 2008 bathing season according to the new EC Bathing Water Directive. The new directive requires Member States to switch from passive monitoring of bathing areas to active management and thereby ensure better protection of bathers. Furthermore, the new directive promotes comprehensive information and involvement of the public.

Bodies of water, whether on the coast or in lakes and rivers, offer more than just a place to swim. They are subject to many uses and, as a result, to pollution. To safeguard bathers against infectious diseases, the new Bathing Water Directive (2006/7/EC) requires periodic testing of microbiological parameters as indicators of pathogens. The bathing waters which are subject to monitoring must also be registered with the EU Commission. The results of the water hygiene quality testing in bathing waters are published in an annual bathing water atlas. The figures for the 2008 bathing season were published on 2 June 2009.

Water quality has greatly improved since the first European bathing water directive went into effect in 1976 and has remained at a constant high level since 2001. On average, 94 percent of inland bathing waters comply with the microbiological parameter values, and 78 percent comply with the stringent standards to achieve 'excellent' water quality. For coastal bathing waters the rates are 98 percent and 87 percent, respectively. The new parameters in effect for the 2008 bathing season resulted in improved quality assessment of freshwater bathing areas. However, coastal waters had significantly fewer waters in the 'excellent' quality category. This may in part be due to the new classification system for the estuaries of large coastal rivers (e.g. the Elbe) that do not usually enjoy 'excellent' water quality. In alignment with the Water Framework Directive, they have been classified as coastal waters since the 2008 bathing season instead of inland waters as done previously. Only 24 bodies of water of a total 2,263-- a mere one percent-- ranked 'poor' in the 2008 bathing season.

Germany's *Laender* have seized upon the opportunity provided by the new directive to involve the public and identified several new bodies of water that are used by many people for swimming. There were 371 new bathing waters registered compared to the 2007 bathing season, thus reaching a figure of 2,263 bathing waters in 2008. 380 of these areas are on the coasts of the North and Baltic Seas, and 1,923 are inland. The *Laender* make websites with a wide range of information on all bathing waters available to the public.

The Federal Environment Agency (UBA) applauds the fact that the new directive focuses on more active management of bathing waters. Each of the *Laender* will have to draw up a so-called bathing water profile by 2015 for each of its bathing waters, in which all potential sources of pollution that might affect water quality as well as potential problems with cyanobacteria (blue algae) are listed. This will enable the introduction of targeted measures to improve the protection of bathers. The ultimate objective must be to achieve a minimum of 'good' quality in all bathing waters, and 'excellent' quality in as many as possible.

In April 2006 the EU Commission had initiated infringement proceedings against Germany and eleven other Member States on suspicions that some bathing waters had purposely been withdrawn from the atlas between 1992 and 2004 in order to avoid poor test results, even though the areas continued to be actively used. The Commission halted proceedings against Germany on 14 May 2009 after all withdrawals registered since 1992 were substantiated in detail. It has thus been confirmed that there are no grounds for objection to the de-registration of those bathing waters in Germany.

The EC Bathing Water Directive 2006/7/EC is here (in German):

<http://www.bmu.de/gewaesserschutz/downloads/doc/36874.php>.

More information on bathing waters is available at

<http://www.bmu.de/gewaesserschutz/fb/badegewaesser/doc/2435.php> and the bathing water atlas is here: <http://www.eea.europa.eu/themes/water/status-and-monitoring/state-of-bathing-water-1/bathing-water-data-viewer>.

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