

Press Release No. 40/2008

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Summertime and bathing fun

New regulations in monitoring of bathing waters

As of the 2008 bathing season, Germany's bathing waters will be monitored according to the new EC Bathing Water Directive. The new directive requires Member States to rethink any passive forms of monitoring to active management for the sake of better protection of bathers. Thus, a so-called bathing water profile must be established for each body of bathing water which enumerates, among other things, any sources of pollution that might affect the quality of the water.

Bathing in natural waters outdoors is fun and healthy. However, waste water or runoff from agricultural land may not contaminate bathing waters to the extent that pathogens might trigger disease in bathers. An EC Directive on the quality of bathing waters has therefore been in effect since 1976. It monitors and improves on the quality of bathing waters throughout Europe. In addition to physico-chemical parameters, this directive has up until now concentrated mainly on two microbiological parameters in the monitoring of water quality: *Escherichia coli* and coliform bacteria. Heightened concentrations of *E. Coli* indicate contamination with faecal matter and therefore the presence of pathogens in bathing water. Favourable environmental conditions in bathing water can foster the proliferation of coliform bacteria and are thus not a definite indicator of the presence of pathogens. Instead they suggest general contamination of the body of water which is why they are no longer monitored under the regulations in the new directive.

Bathing waters monitored in accordance with the EC directive must be registered with the EU Commission. The results of hygienic quality testing of the bathing water is published in a bathing water report every year. The water quality of Germany's bathing waters has improved greatly since the EU Bathing Water Directive took effect in 1976, and it has remained stable at a high level since 2001. On average, 94 percent of freshwater bathing waters comply with microbiological limit values, and 80 percent meet the stricter standards of 'very good' water quality. The figures for coastal waters even reached 98 percent and 88 percent, respectively. A deterioration of water quality in coastal areas was registered in 2007, owing primarily to the "coliform bacteria" parameter. A mere 92.1 percent of freshwater bathing waters and 93.7 percent of coastal bathing waters complied with limit values. The cause can in all likelihood be attributed to the weather (a very warm spring followed by a rainy summer). As a result, water

temperatures favoured the growth of certain coliform bacteria as well as rains that washed pollution into bathing waters.

There were 1,939 registered bathing waters in Germany in 2007, of which 1,589 are freshwater and 350 are coastal waters along the North and Baltic Seas. The number of bathing waters does not remain constant. Every year there are waters that are taken out of the registry whilst new waters are added. There may a number of reasons for discontinuation of registration, including construction measures, change of designated use, or too few bathers using the site. In April 2006, the EU Commission began legal proceedings for breach of contract against Germany and eleven other Member States on grounds that it believed that the high number of discontinued registrations was traceable to poor water quality, and that certain bathing waters were purposely taken off the list to avoid negative results being reported in the report. This was in spite of the fact that these bathing areas continued to be actively used. Germany responded to these accusations and detailed the circumstances of every discontinued registration of a body of bathing water since 1992 in a report submitted to the Commission. The Commission response is still forthcoming.

The new EC Bathing Water Directive contains numerous reforms aimed at ensuring better protection of bathers, including:

- More stringent limit values for the microbiological parameters for coastal waters;

- Elimination of the microbiological parameter "coliform bacteria" that is not associated with disease;

- Addition of another obligatory microbiological parameter, "intestinal enterococci" (or intestinal enterococci), that is associated with disease;

- Establishment of a standardised reference procedure for microbiological parameters;

- New calculation procedure in categorisation of bathing waters;

- Consideration of cyanobacteria in monitoring of bathing sites;

- Requirement to create "bathing water profiles" so as to detect possible influx paths of faecal pollutants;

- Possibility of defining predictable periods of heightened risk for bathers and advise against bathing, even if overall quality of bathing water is very good;

- Comprehensive requirements to educate the public;

- Involvement of the public when designating bathing water sites.

There is one piece of bad news in the new directive: limit values for freshwater bathing waters are twice as high as those for coastal waters, which means that bathers' protection against poor water quality in freshwater bathing waters has not been improved.

The EC Bathing Water Directive has been published (in German) at

<http://www.bmu.de/gewaesserschutz/downloads/doc/36874.php>. The 2008 Bathing water quality report for the 2007 bathing season is online as of 2 June 2008 at

http://ec.europa.eu/environment/water/index_en.htm ("Water and Health" - "Bathing Water" - Report 2008).

Dessau, 30 May 2008