Beach Water Quality: Balancing Competing Resource Uses within the Existing Regulatory Framework

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Beaches are iconic, and coastal recreation contributes significantly to the economy. As a result, when regulating microbiological water quality of beaches, the focus is on protecting human health through the imposition of limits on fecal indicator bacteria. These bacteria, however, originate from wildlife as well as human sources. As wildlife is another resource to be protected, this complicates the application of these limits, particularly in coastal areas where biologically diverse and sometimes threatened habitats exist. This highlights one of the challenges posed in managing beach water as a result of competing resource uses. When such conflicts arise, a policy solution that balances protection for each important resource use should be developed within the confines of the existing regulatory framework. This paper presents an approach taken by the Los Angeles Regional Water Quality Control Board in addressing the high levels of fecal indicator bacteria at beaches. Water quality standards and total maximum daily loads were developed recognizing that it would not be environmentally prudent or reasonable to eliminate all fecal indicator bacteria conveyed to beaches. This approach maintains the protection of human health and removes the undue burden of having the regulated community responsible for remediation of natural source bacteria loadings. In addition, it avoids potential damage or elimination of valuable aquatic and wildlife habitat, which could result from removing critical flows from coastal streams.

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