



At a Glance

Why We Did This Review

This is a quick reaction report that addresses requirements under the Beaches Environmental Assessment and Coastal Health Act of 2000 (BEACH Act). Based on a request from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA's) Region 2 Administrator, we are evaluating whether programs that the U.S. Virgin Islands (USVI) operates meet EPA requirements, and what steps EPA Region 2 has taken to ensure the programs have achieved the intended benefits. Region 2 provided to USVI a grant of more than \$300,000 for weekly monitoring of USVI beaches over fiscal years 2013 and 2014. Any issues to report on the territory's overall performance in the BEACH Act or other environmental programs will be reported separately.

This report addresses the following EPA themes:

- *Making a visible difference in communities across the country.*
- *Protecting water: A precious, limited resource.*

For further information, contact our public affairs office at (202) 566-2391.

The full report is at:
www.epa.gov/oig/reports/2014/20140331-14-P-0155.pdf

Quick Reaction Report: EPA Oversight Needed to Ensure Beach Safety in U.S. Virgin Islands

What We Found

In violation of its agreement under the BEACH Act grant with the EPA, the USVI Department of Planning and Natural Resources (DPNR) did not monitor the beaches on St. Thomas and St. John for pathogens between February 3–16, 2014. Under the grant, beach sampling is supposed to occur on a weekly basis at 23 beaches on these two islands to identify any harmful levels of contamination in the water. In response to our draft report, Region 2 is acting to oversee and assess the USVI beach monitoring program. Region 2 took immediate action to address the lapse in sampling and asked the DPNR to develop a plan for notifying the EPA if sampling ceases again. Region 2 is also working to address the lack of a contract to conduct beach sampling.

The lapse in sampling of USVI beaches created risk that the public was exposed to unsafe levels of bacteria and the environment may have been endangered.

The DPNR restarted beach sampling on February 17, 2014. The lapse in sampling posed potential health hazards to humans and may have endangered the environment. The DPNR issued press releases, which two USVI newspapers printed on February 7 and 14, 2014, indicating that beaches in St. Thomas and St. John had not been monitored the previous week. This action was consistent with DPNR procedures for public notification. However, this may not be adequate notice for tourists visiting the USVI, as they may not read the local newspapers.

Recommendations and Corrective Actions

We recommended that the EPA Regional Administrator, Region 2:

- Immediately take steps to ensure that the USVI beach monitoring and public notification meet EPA guidelines and continue.
- Determine whether the DPNR has a sustainable beach monitoring program in place (for example, with valid contracts for sampling and lab analysis) that will provide continuous beach monitoring and adequate public notification. If it is determined that the USVI beach monitoring program is not sustainable, the EPA should manage the program according to the BEACH Act until the DPNR can demonstrate it can meet all BEACH Act requirements and EPA guidance.

The agency agreed with our recommendations and said actions it already has underway achieve the purpose of the recommendations. In response to recommendation 1, Region 2 stated it held a conference call with the DPNR to discuss the lapse, and requested DPNR prepare a contingency plan. In response to recommendation 2, EPA Region 2 described several areas where the region and the DPNR are working to address the beach monitoring program deficiencies.