

*The Virginia Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) monitors bacteria to determine the overall quality of water bodies for recreational uses. The Virginia State Water Control Board adopted updates to the recreational bacteria water quality criteria in 2018, requiring DEQ to adapt its programs. These changes may affect Volunteer Monitoring groups.*

### **Why did the bacteria water quality standard change?**

Periodically, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency reviews its recommended water quality criteria to reflect the best available science. The former criteria were updated after incorporating years of new studies that continue to show a link between illness and fecal bacteria contamination in waterways.

### **How do the revised water quality criteria compare to the former criteria?**

The revised criteria are more comprehensive than the previous ones for two reasons. First, in the past, a waterbody had to meet only one of the criteria elements and now it must meet two. Second, samples were previously collected over a six-year period, but now more frequent samples are collected within a 90-day window.

### **How is DEQ's water quality monitoring program adapting to these changes?**

As more frequent monitoring is necessary, DEQ will prioritize sites for high-frequency (HF) monitoring. Low-frequency (LF) site monitoring will continue to determine prioritization for HF monitoring.

### **What is required for Volunteer Monitoring data to be used in assessments and watershed clean-up work?**

The Volunteer Monitoring Methods Manual was updated to help Volunteer Monitoring groups understand how and when their bacteria data can be used by the agency in assessments and watershed clean-up efforts.

### **How can Volunteer Monitoring groups help?**

Volunteer Monitoring groups can continue to play a valuable role collecting bacteria data and sharing it with DEQ. However, it is important that they evaluate monitoring plans to see if any changes are necessary to continue to meet bacteria monitoring objectives.

### **How does DEQ's monitoring objective differ from that of the Virginia Department of Health (VDH)?**

DEQ's bacteria monitoring program is designed to determine the general health of the Commonwealth's waterways, identify recreational waters with too much bacteria and develop clean-up plans for these waters. VDH conducts its own bacteria monitoring at public coastal beaches and, in rare cases, uses DEQ data to determine whether or not to issue public swimming advisories. DEQ's bacteria monitoring program does not provide a real-time indication of swimming conditions for the public.

### **How does DEQ select HF bacteria monitoring sites?**

Because HF bacteria monitoring occurs roughly weekly over a 90-day period, HF monitoring sites demand more resources. As a result, HF monitoring sites are prioritized using a number of factors – notably, those with a high potential for people to swim or submerge themselves in the water. For more information, see the Water Quality Standard Revised Bacteria Criteria Info Sheet.

### **How will this affect watershed clean-up work such as Total Maximum Daily Loads (TMDLs) and TMDL Implementation Plans (IPs)?**

All future TMDLs and TMDL IPs developed to clean-up bacteria pollution will have to meet these revised criteria. Existing bacteria plans will continue to be implemented; however, they will not be revised unless specific circumstances deem it necessary.

### **How will Virginia Pollution Discharge Elimination System (VPDES) permit compliance be impacted by the revised water quality standards?**

The revised bacteria criteria do not have any impact on permit compliance. Previously, compliance was measured on geometric mean concentrations. Since the geometric mean criterion has not changed, the process

# Implementing the Revised Bacteria Criteria

## Frequently Asked Questions

for permittees to collect and submit data for compliance has not changed. For more information, see [9VAC25-260-170.A.2](#).