



Reference: 015-2025-SJ

Thursday, 29 May 2025

The Hon. Penny Sharpe, MLC
Minister for the Environment
52 Martin Place
SYDNEY NSW 2000

cc. Minister for Water, Minister for Health and Minister for Local Government

By online contact form

Re: Future of the NSW Beachwatch program

Dear Minister Sharpe,

I write to you on behalf of the Sydney Coastal Councils Group (SCCG) regarding the future of the NSW Beachwatch program. We are seeking a response from you to our letter of the [23 September 2024 \(Ref: MD24/3280\)](#), and the letters from our member Councils to your Department identifying their unwillingness to now fund the program. We have reached out to DCCEEW regarding the issues raised in our letter, but staff advised that this was a matter for the Minister.

Our members are unwilling to fund the NSW Beachwatch Program

As you are aware, the NSW Government recently consulted with all Sydney Councils that contain Beachwatch sites in their Local Government Areas and identified that monitoring at these sites will discontinue unless funding is provided by Councils from the 30 June 2025. Our members have advised your department that they will not be financially contributing and believe that it should remain a state-funded program. The rationale for this is summarised in our previous correspondence available [here](#) and include:

- cost-shifting from State to local Councils
- lack of any legal responsibility for Councils to monitor water quality at beaches
- equity issues where other region's water authorities (e.g. Sydney Water and Hunter Water) fund the Beachwatch program but not in the Sydney region.

Maintaining a robust water quality monitoring program is vital

Our members and their communities greatly value the NSW Beachwatch program as well as other NSW Government led initiatives such as the Shark Management Program which provide vital information to the public on water safety.

As poor Beachwatch ratings are primarily due to sewage contamination, the program's Annual State of the Beaches reports are also an important resource for Councils to monitor the activities of Sydney Water. For many of the Beachwatch sites that have consistently received poor ratings in the past, working groups consisting of representatives from Sydney Water, Council and the community have been established to prioritise actions to address water quality issues. For some, such as Rose Bay,

research using molecular microbiological approaches were done which confirmed that human faeces from sewer was the key source of contamination both during wet-weather and dry-weather¹

Recent incidents of water pollution that led to the closure of 22 Sydney beaches over Summer due to the presence of debris balls washing ashore, later identified to be the responsibility of Sydney Water, emphasise the importance of maintaining a long-term and robust water quality monitoring program for Sydney. This is fundamental to protect public health and safety and maintain the economic viability of business surrounding these beaches.

Continuing the monitoring program also aligns and supports the NSW Government's recently released [NSW IWCM Framework](#) which honours the Government's commitment to using integrated water cycle management (IWCM) to improve outcomes for communities in NSW and deliver on commitments identified in various strategies including the [Greater Sydney Water Strategy](#). 'Monitor, evaluate and learn' is one of the five stages of the framework.

Changes may be needed to Sydney Water's notifications system

Currently, for any sewage pollution incidents occurring within one kilometre of a Beachwatch site, Sydney Water notifies the NSW Beachwatch team and this information is uploaded to the Beachwatch web-site to alert the public. Where a Beachwatch site may cease to exist due to Councils not funding its monitoring, it is unclear if and how this notification will occur.

The SCCG has been in discussions with Sydney Water through its regular quarterly meetings to discuss this issue and Sydney Water has acknowledged that changes to their notification system may be required. Given the time taken to establish new notification processes between Sydney Water and our members, we would appreciate feedback from you as soon as possible as to whether Beachwatch sites not funded by Councils will cease.

Opportunity to require Sydney Water to fund Beachwatch monitoring through the licence review process

The Environment Protection Authority (EPA) is reviewing Sydney Water's licences for its 23 sewage treatment systems across Greater Sydney and the Illawarra. The SCCG believes that this is an opportunity for the NSW Government to strengthen Sydney Water's licences and better align them with licences of water authorities in other regions.

According to the 2023-24 State of the Beaches report for the Illawarra region, Sydney Water undertakes Beachwatch monitoring at 11 locations in the region. Similarly, Hunter Water undertakes Beachwatch monitoring in the Hunter region with some sites monitored as part of its environment protection licence, as identified in the latest 2023-24 State of the Beaches report for the Hunter region.

The SCCG will be raising this equity issue in its upcoming submission to the EPA.

NSW Government's commitment to reduce cost shifting to local government welcomed

As raised in our previous correspondence, shifting the costs of Beachwatch from State Government to Local Government is not supported by our nine Council members. It is therefore pleasing to see the NSW Government acknowledges cost-shifting in its response to the *Inquiry into the ability of local governments to fund infrastructure and services* (report located [here](#)) and commits to the following:

Recommendation 15: That the NSW Government:

- *Identify opportunities to reduce cost shifting to local government*

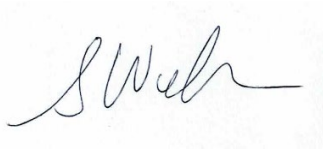
¹ Williams et al (2022) Molecular microbiological approaches reduce ambiguity about the sources of faecal pollution and identify microbial hazards with an urbanised coastal environment. *Water Research* 218

- *Undertake greater consultation with local government prior to making decisions that may result in cost-shifting.*

Given this commitment and the other issues raised above, we ask that you reconsider the funding model for the NSW Beachwatch program and reinstate it as a state-funded program.

We look forward to your response on these important matters at your earliest possible convenience. If you have any queries, please contact Sarah Joyce (Executive Director of SCCG) by email at sarah@sydneycoastalcouncils.com.au.

Yours sincerely,



Councillor Shannon Welch
Chair, SCCG