



August 13, 2008

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The Honorable Thomas A. Tangretti
PA House of Representatives
Chairman
House Tourism and Recreational Development Committee
328 Irvis Office Building
PO Box 202057
Harrisburg, PA 17120-2057

The Honorable Jerry L. Nailor
PA House of Representatives
Minority Chairman
House Tourism and Recreational Development Committee
312 Main Capitol Building
PO Box 202088
Harrisburg, PA 17120-2088

Re: Open Swim Program at State Park Beaches

Dear Rep. Tangretti and Rep. Nailor:

I am writing to provide additional information on the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR) open swim program at state park beaches; including the experience of other state and national recreational facilities, the history of our program and experience, and efforts we have made to strengthen the open swim program for the remainder of the 2008 season. Managing 58 beaches and hundreds of miles of shorelines on streams, rivers, and lakes, and an average of 3 million swimmer days per year, we know there are inherent dangers in water related activities. DCNR is committed to having a swimming program that provides park visitors with safe, healthful, and enjoyable outdoor recreation opportunities.

Other States' and Federal Experience

DCNR did not enter into the open swim program in a vacuum. The National Forest Service and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers have always offered open swim, and the National Park service varies its program from site to site. More than 40 other states have instituted unguarded/open swim programs at many or all of their inland beaches. For

example, Ohio and Indiana state parks have instituted programs identical to ours, retaining lifeguards only at pools and Great Lakes beaches, with good public safety records. Indiana went to full open swim in 2000. Ohio started its program in 1999 and went to full open swim in 2006.

These agencies have observed, as has DCNR, no detectable increase in the number of drownings or accidents at open swim areas; greater parental attentiveness and a better overall family atmosphere; and, greater public access to beaches due to the expansion of swimming hours and season length.

History of Open Swimming in State Parks (1998-2007)

DCNR instituted open swim at state park beaches in 1998, during the first term of the Ridge Administration. The program grew out of our observation of national practice and a continued inability to hire enough qualified guards to cover one shift per day, seven days per week for the entire swimming season. Parks annually were unable to staff their beaches due to lifeguard availability until early to mid June, and then ended their guard season during mid to late August when guards (students) returned to school. This situation left many state park beaches without guards or enough guards to operate, forcing them to close beaches or seriously curtail swimming opportunities for the public.

At the beginning, the pilot program consisted of expanded swimming hours so that swimming areas were open during park hours of 8am until sunset, but guarded only during the normal lifeguard shift of 11am – 7pm. The program was successfully instituted at 13 state parks and welcomed by our visitors.

In 1999, the remainder of state park beaches adopted expanded hours with open swim outside of the traditionally guarded hours of 11am – 7pm. To address the increasing difficulty of properly staffing beaches at the end of the season, individual parks were granted permission to offer all-day (8am to sunset) open swim opportunities to our visitors in lieu of closing the beaches to swimming.

To maintain a pipeline of seasonal lifeguards, park managers contacted local schools, colleges, and universities to encourage students to become lifeguards. To further attract applicants, DCNR has raised the pay rates for lifeguards many times over the last decade (current starting rate is \$10.05/hour). Despite these efforts, DCNR has not been able to hire and retain the number of guards needed to provide full coverage system-wide, and these gaps in coverage have increased over time.

Between 1999 and 2007, full open-swim was incrementally expanded statewide to include a total of 27 state park beaches.

Our experience

The basic tenet of the open swim program has been to clearly inform our visitors that DCNR does not have lifeguards on duty and for parents, guardians, and friends to watch out for the safety of their group. Our safety record during the period of incremental expansion has been strong. From 1998 through 2007, DCNR experienced two drownings within designated swimming areas, both of which occurred at guarded beaches. Our regular review of the program indicates that providing lifeguards at beaches *some* of the time has in some cases created a false sense of security among regular beachgoers when guards were not present. **Consistent management practice is the safest policy for managing our beaches.**

DCNR's state park staff has the safety of our visitors as their first concern. Beaches are patrolled and monitored to ensure public safety. Rangers and managers receive extensive training in first aid and CPR, water rescue, and other specialized fields related to public safety, and are in direct radio contact with county emergency management staff.

In addition, beaches are clearly posted with "Open Swimming Area – No Lifeguard on Duty" signs (bilingual where appropriate). Designated swimming areas are generally a maximum depth of five feet, and have sandy or river gravel bottoms that are regular and gentle sloping. Ring buoy stands, marked "Emergency Use Only," are provided for rescue purposes; patrol boats are readily available for rescue; public telephones are provided with takeaway hospital directions nearby; and, signs indicating location of first-aid facilities are posted.

There is significant public support for the open swim program. During the past 11 years, DCNR has received generally favorable public comment on the expanded swimming opportunities afforded by the open swim program – people appreciate the flexibility of longer hours and seasons for swimming. Open swim beaches close in mid-to-late September, which is a customer service improvement compared to the post-Labor Day beach closings of prior years.

Open Swim Program in 2008

On January 10 of this year, DCNR announced the full adoption of the open swim program and implemented it at the remaining 15 state park beaches that had had some lifeguard presence in 2007 and two facilities – Lyman Run and Gouldsboro - that were closed for the past several years for construction projects. Lifeguards were retained at swimming pools and Presque Isle State Park beaches.

Continued evaluation and adaptive management

Since the opening of the 2008 season, DCNR has continuously reviewed the open swim program with a particular focus on state park beaches that have just completed the transition from partial to full open swim programs. At the outset, DCNR increased ranger and other staff presence at all swimming beaches and we have continued to evaluate and adapt our practice throughout the summer. Based on user volume and manager feedback, DCNR assigned a ranger to patrol the beach area at six of the beaches (Black Moshannon, Raccoon Creek, Laurel Hill, Canoe Creek, Cowans Gap, and Beltzville) between the peak hours of 11am to 7pm, ranging from five to seven days per week. Rangers and other staff patrolling beaches are not intended to be a replacement for lifeguards. Instead, they manage out-of-water activity and maintain awareness of in-water activity, and educate patrons about open swim, easing the transition.

A detailed and ongoing beach inspection process was vigorously administered to ensure compliance with standard safety practices. In certain locations, DCNR improved signage, adjusted buoy lines marking the outer edge of swimming areas for greater uniformity of depth, and enhanced the visibility of the buoys. DCNR provided additional training to staff and set up a best-practice intranet web site which allows and encourages managers to share their experiences with their peers. We updated the DCNR website and our publications to communicate the changes in our operations.

As a normal management practice, staff from the regional offices and the central office make periodic field visits to assess the practice and suggest changes if necessary. DCNR has experienced no noticeable decrease in beach use.

July 2008 Drowning at Fuller Lake

DCNR experienced the first drowning at a designated open swim area in July of 2008 at Pine Grove Furnace State Park's Fuller Lake swimming beach, which became a full open swim beach in 2008. The victim, a 17-year-old male, was at the park with a group consisting of nine youth supervised by four adult counselors from a group home located in southeastern PA. While swimming the youth slipped under the water and failed to resurface without being noticed by anyone in his group or any of the 50 plus beach goers. His body was recovered where water depth was over 30 feet. This was a tragic event and represents the fifth drowning this year in state parks, though none of the others occurred in a designated swimming area.

Ongoing adaptive management in 2008

As part of our ongoing adaptive management approach, DCNR has made additional modifications to the open swim program to ensure the public is fully informed and aware. These changes will be maintained for the remainder of the summer (i.e. through Labor Day):

- Maintaining ranger or other staff beach presence from 11 am to 7 pm at the seven state park beaches noted above (Black Moshannon, Raccoon Creek, Laurel Hill, Canoe Creek, Cowans Gap, Beltzville, and Pine Grove Furnace), and, as of August 2, increasing certain of these from the currently scheduled five days per week, to bring all to a seven day per week schedule.
- Adding ranger or other staff beach presence from 11 am to 7 pm, seven days per week at an additional 10 state park beaches (Bald Eagle, Chapman, Gifford Pinchot, Moraine, Parker Dam, Shawnee, Tuscarora, Yellow Creek, Lyman Run, and Gouldsboro), effective the week of August 10, to thereby include all 17 beaches that transitioned to the full open swim program in 2008.
- Stepping up patrols by Managers, Rangers and other staff (not already assigned to the beach area) at the beginning of the season and adjusting throughout the summer, to reinforce compliance, beach safety, and public understanding at all park swimming beaches.
- Deploying available Environmental Educators and Recreation Programmers, who staff all but two of the state parks with swimming beaches, to give impromptu safety and outdoor recreation programs at beach swimming areas throughout the summer to increase public awareness.

DCNR strives to provide a safe outdoor experience for all of our visitors, and we are deeply saddened by the tragedy that occurred this summer at Fuller Lake. DCNR will continue to work as hard as we can to offer families a safe and memorable outdoor experience while actively promoting safety, by using our park staff to educate visitors, and by increasing the vigilance of all at the waters edge.

We look forward to discussing this further with the committee this fall.

Sincerely,



Michael DiBerardinis
Secretary