

Public Health Advisories Related to St. Simons Sound Incident: FAQ

Information Current as of December 16, 2019

Compiled by GA Dept. of Public Health, Coastal Health District

Is it safe for me to swim in the ocean around St. Simons Island and Jekyll Island?

The Coastal Health District is alerting swimmers and recreational fishers that oil may be present on area beaches. Beaches are not closed but beachgoers should stay alert. Swim and fish with caution and avoid contact with oil or oily products on the beach. The public is reminded that the water conditions could change quickly while the cargo carrier remains in the channel. If you see a sheen of oil on the surface of the water, do not swim or fish.

For additional information on the incident response, monitor the response website at <https://ssireponse.com/>.

Is the beach closed?

No, the beaches are not closed but beachgoers should stay alert. Swim and fish with caution.

What if I get oil on my skin or clothes?

If you step on a tar ball or get oil on your skin, wash off the oil with soap and clean water. There is no need to use harsh detergents, solvents or other chemicals to wash oil from skin or clothing – these could be harmful to you.

Is it safe for me to go fishing in these areas, and are the fish and shellfish safe to eat?

Fish with caution, and do not fish in any areas with visible oil. Fish and shellfish consumption guidelines have not changed. You should clean and thoroughly cook the fish before eating, just as you would fish caught from any water. For more detailed information about fishing and shellfish, contact the Department of Natural Resources Coastal Resources Division at 912-264-7218.

Is anyone testing the water for the presence of oil?

The Georgia Department of Natural Resources Environmental Protection Division (EPD) is overseeing a water sampling and testing program. Analytical results are reviewed by EPD to determine environmental compliance. The Georgia Department of Public Health evaluates those results to determine if there are any health concerns.

How often is the water being tested?

Water samples are taken from 5 locations each month. Once the samples are received by the laboratory, the typical turnaround time for results is 48 hours.

What exactly is the water being tested for?

The samples are tested for the presence of volatile organic compounds (VOCs), semivolatile organic compounds (SVOCs), and metals, which would encompass pollutants found in fuel and lubricants stored on the ship. The analytical methods being used can, additionally, detect almost 200 hazardous chemicals including organic solvents, polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), some pesticides, and toxic heavy metals. These constituents would not naturally be found in ocean water.

Who is testing the water?

The actual testing is done by NewFields Environmental Forensics Laboratory in Massachusetts. The Georgia Department of Natural Resources Environmental Protection Division is overseeing the sampling and testing program.

Will you announce the results of each test?

No, but we will post any changes to the advisory status that may occur based on these test results (see next question).

If you change the advisory status, how will I find out?

Any change in advisory status will be posted on our St. Simons Sound Incident web page at gachd.org/ssiresponse. We will send a press release to area media, and we will post information to our own social media channels (Facebook, Twitter and Instagram).

I saw oil on the beach/in the ocean. What should I do?

Do not swim in the water if you see visible oil, and don't fish in areas where oil is visible on the water. If you see oil on the beach, contact the U.S. Coast Guard National Response Center at 1-800-424-8802 to make a report.

I heard about a beach water testing program that screens for bacteria in the water. Is this the same program?

No, that is a different program. The Georgia Department of Natural Resources Coastal Resources Division has a beach water monitoring program to test for enterococcus bacteria, which come from warm-blooded mammals like humans and some wildlife. The agency tests water samples from Georgia beaches every week of the year and has done so for many years. This program is not related to the cargo carrier incident and will continue.

Any beach water advisories concerning enterococcus bacteria will be posted on the [Coastal Health District website](#) and signs will also be posted at public beach access points. If a beach is under advisory because of an elevated bacteria level, we recommend you avoid swimming at that beach until the level goes back down, and the advisory is lifted. An elevated level of bacteria in the water could mean an increased risk of illness for swimmers.

Helpful Phone Numbers:

Additional Public Health Questions

Coastal Health District toll-free at 844-863-0325

To report oil on the beach

U.S. Coast Guard National Response Center at 800-424-8802

To report oiled wildlife

800-261-0980

Questions related to fish and shellfish

Department of Natural Resources Coastal Resources Division at 912-264-7218

Questions related to Environmental Protection/Water Protection

Department of Natural Resources Environmental Protection Division (EPD) at 404-651-7970

Joint Information Center/Media Inquiries

912-944-7122

Claims Information

888-850-8486