

Media Statement
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GOVERNMENT ANNOUNCES CONDITIONAL REOPENING OF THE BEACHES AFFECTED BY THE CORNUBIA CHEMICAL SPILL

The KwaZulu-Natal MEC for Economic Development, Tourism and Environmental Affairs (EDTEA), Mr Ravi Pillay, has announced that the beaches that were closed due to contamination from the toxic chemical spill emanating from the UPL warehouse in Cornubia in July, would be significantly, but not completely, and reopened from 2 November 2021. This follows the recommendations of a peer review of the specialists' report on the safety of the beaches and reflects concurrence by the national Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment, provincial Department of Economic Development, Tourism and Environmental Affairs and the eThekweni and KwaDukuza Municipalities.

All beaches from the uMgeni River mouth to Salt Rock have been closed since the toxic spill in July. The specialists' report had recommended that the beaches be reopened for recreational purposes, but that an "exclusion zone" of one kilometre north and south of the uMhlanga estuary mouth, and one kilometre out to sea, in which all activities remain prohibited, should be maintained. This means that 96% of the beaches that had been closed will now be opened for recreational purposes only but not for fishing or harvesting of marine resources.

All fishing and harvesting of marine resources (shore angling and the harvesting, utilisation and consumption of shellfish) between the uMgeni River mouth to Salt Rock and one kilometre out to sea, remain prohibited. The national Department of Forestry, Fisheries and Environment (DFFE) will make a decision on the reopening of this zone at the appropriate time.

The MEC reiterated that given the risks the "precautionary principle" had to be applied. Accordingly it was deemed prudent to not rely on one opinion only, even though this was the collective opinion of a group of specialists, without subjecting this to a "second opinion" by way of a peer review.

The peer review was undertaken by British Professor Jason Weeks, a highly respected and eminently qualified expert with vast experience in the assessment of toxic spills. Professor Weeks completed his review of more than 64 documents that comprise the specialists' report, and has now provided his full report and findings, which is also being released to the public today.

In the opinion of Professor Weeks, based on an overview of the reported evidence, the recommendation to open the beaches could be supported for recreational use and surfing.

The restriction on fishing and harvesting of marine resources will remain in place.

Professor Weeks concluded that whilst there remain some uncertainties, efforts to remediate and remove any ongoing sources of contamination from the site and upper reaches of the tributary appeared to be effective.

While the specialists have concluded that the beaches are safe to open for now, further monitoring and analysis will be conducted and the public informed of the outcome thereof.

MEC Pillay was satisfied that the peer review further enabled an informed decision on the risks posed to the public. The MEC accepted the opinion of Professor Weeks that the ongoing risk posed to recreational users is low to negligible, but to continue a closed exclusion zone 1 km south and 1 km

north of the uMhlanga estuary mouth, and 1 km out to sea. The public is requested to comply with this exclusion zone.

Professor Weeks agrees with the recommendation of the specialists, that the decision to restrict/prevent harvesting of marine vertebrates or invertebrates from the region should remain in place. All collection is prohibited pending further monitoring and analysis. The monitoring will continue for the foreseeable future until evidence indicates that any risk has been adequately mitigated.

“We understand that the closure of beaches has had a negative impact on businesses and subsistence fishermen. We had decided to approach the matter with extreme caution given the impact that any irresponsible decision could have on public health. We are satisfied now, as specialists have said in their reports, that there is little to no danger in reopening the beaches for recreational purposes. Of course going forward there will be a constant review of the situation,” MEC Pillay said.

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ISSUED BY THE KWAZULU-NATAL DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, TOURISM AND ENVIRONMENTAL AFFAIRS