

Recommendation to the International Blue Flag Jury - additional Blue Flag Criteria for South African Blue Flag Beaches:

As approved by the South African Blue Flag Jury on the 30 August 2023

1. Background:

The general South African public perception is that a Blue Flag rating means that it's "safe to swim" on a Blue Flag beach. However, sewage contamination has become a consistent problem along many South African beaches and directly impacts water quality characteristics and perceptions of Blue Flag beaches. While eight "imperative" criteria of the 33 Blue Flag qualifying standards relate directly to water quality, and two other criteria have broad application, the current protocols are geared to long-term continual-presence quality issues, not short-term spillages dissipated by dynamic waters within a few days. With the increased load-shedding and failing sanitation systems prevalent across South African coastal municipalities, short-term incidents threaten the health of bathers on the day and jeopardise the public trust in the Blue Flag standard. To address these challenges, the South African Blue Flag Jury will propose to the International Blue Flag Jury a stricter application of current criteria and a phased-in approach of additional criteria for all Blue Flag beaches and beach operators/managing authorities. Those criteria are as follows:

2. The **existing criteria** that will be **assessed more strictly** are:

- a) **Bathing water profiles** (Criterion #9) must identify sewage pump stations, sewer pipelines, wastewater treatment plants, stormwater and effluent outlets, and rivers/lagoons/estuaries in close proximity (within 2 km's) to beaches awarded Blue Flag status
- b) Visual confirmation (photo's) of **water quality results** posted to Blue Flag information boards (Criterion #3) must be submitted to the national operator once every two weeks
- c) **Visual evidence of the presence of** Blue Flag boards, maps, and flags flying must be submitted to the national operator no less than once a month during the season (Criterion #3 and others)
- d) Beach operators must confirm with each seasonal application that **samplers and laboratories are independent of the operator/municipal authority** (Criterion #8)
- e) **Emergency plans** (Criterion # 29) are in place and practical and deal with short-term spillages (including damage from storm surges and peak weather incidents)

3. The **additional criteria, recommended/optional** for the 2023-2024 season, compulsory (after a post-season evaluation) for the 2024-2025 season, are as follows:

- a. **Water sampling must take place at least every two weeks** with **no replacement samples** allowed unless an extreme event occurred and there is evidence to back this up as a dispensation request.
- b. **Seasons to be a minimum of 12 weeks**, typically mid-November/start of December to mid-February/end of February. Exceptions can be applied for on a case-by-case basis by submission of a motivation.
- c. Compulsory activation of **beach management committees** (see Criterion #12) trained in the Blue Flag criterion, who act as monitors, meet regularly with the

beach operator, and have direct access to the national operator as a final resort. The committee must be comprised of/include members from adjacent communities and a range of beach/sea users.

- d. **Coastal Management Forums** (as per the Integrated Coastal Management Act) are put in place in municipalities where Blue Flag beaches occur – in compliance with *Criterion #13: The local authority/beach operator must comply with all laws and/or regulations affecting the location and operation of the beach*. Where practical, beach management committees can be incorporated into coastal management forums (example PCC: Provincial Coastal Management).
- e. Beach officials/lifeguards must **monitor conditions daily and must lower flags immediately** when known pollution incidents have occurred. The precautionary principle applies, collection and analysis of samples should be arranged as soon as is possible and flags only raised once the samples confirm quality standards are within bounds.
- f. Water quality results by independent laboratories must be **released jointly and directly to the national operator**, and beach operators/local authorities must release the same to the **public no later than five working days** after receiving the results.
- g. Public release of water quality information must be placed on both Blue Flag notice boards and on **municipal websites where possible**.
- h. The national operator will post results and reports received from beach operators/local authorities on its own website.

The national operator would **recommend** the following as optional criteria/actions:

- i. That **water samplers are commissioned to assess other Blue Flag criteria** too (such as facilities, litter, information maps and boards, toilets) and provide a report to the beach management committee within five working days of assessment
- j. That the recently released **rapid-testing Bacterisk+ kit and reagent** produced by the UK-based company **Molendotech**, be considered for purchase, and use by beach operators/local authorities. *As far as we are aware this is the only commercially available rapid-testing (results within 30 minutes) product currently available world-wide. But whilst relatively simple to operate, it is costly given South African exchange rates. Details of this product can be obtained from the National operator.*

In addition to the above, the National operator will embark on a public awareness campaign to explain the Blue Flag parameters and workings, the importance of the “flag flying”, the additional criteria approved by the International Jury, and contact details for the national operator.

If a municipality is unable to comply with any of the above, a motivation must be provided with the application as a dispensation request which will then be assessed by the Blue Flag National Jury Committee.