Beachwatch 2022–32

Our vision for the future

Department of Planning and Environment

NSW GOVERNMENT

Contents

Welcome to the Beachwatch vision for the future

Beachwatch is a NSW Government-led program that monitors and reports on recreational water quality at ocean beaches and estuaries in NSW.

The program provides information on the level of sewage and stormwater pollution at beaches to indicate their suitability for swimming and recreational use.

Beachwatch is committed to building upon its substantial knowledge base and communicating this understanding to people so they can make informed decisions about where and when to swim.

Beaches and estuaries used for recreational purposes deliver substantial societal and economic benefits. This 2022–2032 plan sets out a new vision for Beachwatch to meet increasing community demand for information on safe swim sites throughout NSW. It outlines the longer-term vision for safe and healthy waterways and provides transparency and strong guidance for decision-making to our stakeholders, the NSW Government, and the people of NSW.

Since Beachwatch began there have been significant water quality improvements along the NSW coast, with 94% of monitored ocean beaches graded as good or very good, indicating they are suitable for swimming most or almost all of the time.

However, local pollution from stormwater runoff and sewage system overflows can impact on water quality and there is still more work to do. With a greater appreciation of local recreational opportunities, it is now time to expand our focus to rivers and inland waterways to ensure they are safe for swimming now and into the future.

- Beachwatch monitoring plays an important role in detecting emerging pollution problems
- It provides a knowledge base for government for the ongoing management of water quality issues
- Local government and wastewater managers use the information to assess and prioritise stormwater and wastewater management works and improvements
- Beachwatch also provides rigorous evidence-based assessments for councils to consider when developing their Coastal Management Programs

About Beachwatch

Since launching in 1989

More than
300,000
water samples collected

over
10,000
daily beach pollution advisories issued

32
annual reports delivered

Beachwatch monitoring supports:

- NSW State of the Beaches reporting

- Health of our Estuaries reporting, which is committed under the Government's *Future Directions Statement for the NSW Coastal and Estuary Management Program* (2021)

- NSW State of the Environment reporting prepared under section 10 of the *Protection of the Environment Administration Act 1991*

- Marine Estate Management Authority threat and risk assessments, which set Government priorities for marine estate management.

Case Study

Beachwatch enables positive change for the Central Coast

- Coffs Harbour
- Newcastle
- Central Coast region
- Sydney

Routine Beachwatch monitoring measures the impact of pollution sources, helps assess the effectiveness of stormwater and wastewater management practices, and highlights areas where further work is needed.

Since 2002, Central Coast Council has partnered with Beachwatch to monitor recreational water quality to assess how suitable sites are for swimming.

Monitored sites include ocean beaches, ocean baths, estuarine areas in Brisbane Water, designated swimming areas in Lake Macquarie, Lake Munmorah and Tuggerah Lakes, and four coastal lagoons.

While many sites have good water quality and are suitable for swimming most of the time, routine monitoring periodically detected poor water quality at Terrigal Beach, which caused some community concern.

During 2019–20 Central Coast Council, the Department of Planning and Environment (DPE) and the University of Technology Sydney investigated the extent and source of poor recreational water quality issues at Terrigal Beach to ensure the right solutions are delivered.

Council is using the findings from the investigation to detect and resolve water quality issues in the catchment. Council will be able to use Beachwatch monitoring data to monitor and assess the outcomes of actions to ultimately improve water quality at the beach.

Case Study

Beachwatch supports flood recovery by identifying when it is safe to return to the water

Beachwatch monitoring ensures that guidelines are followed, so councils can feel confident that sites are ready to reopen, and human health risks are assessed.

In 2022, extreme wet weather caused major flooding of rivers and coastal waterways along the NSW coast, which posed a risk to recreational activities.

Large amounts of potentially dangerous microorganisms can be present in flood waters from overflows of wastewater infrastructure and soil. Sewage and septic systems often become overloaded during flooding, causing the release of raw sewage into flood waters. Human exposure to pathogenic microbes in floodwaters can cause severe gastrointestinal and respiratory illness, as well as other medical complications.

Monitoring by Beachwatch and partner councils found flooding events impacted waterways beyond the flood zones, including Sydney Harbour and the Sydney ocean beaches, making microbial water quality unsuitable for swimming.

Routine water quality testing showed some sites unsuitable for swimming for up to four weeks. During this time, Beachwatch was able to provide high-quality data and trusted reporting about swim sites to help inform the public about their risks and protect the health and wellbeing of people in flood affected areas.
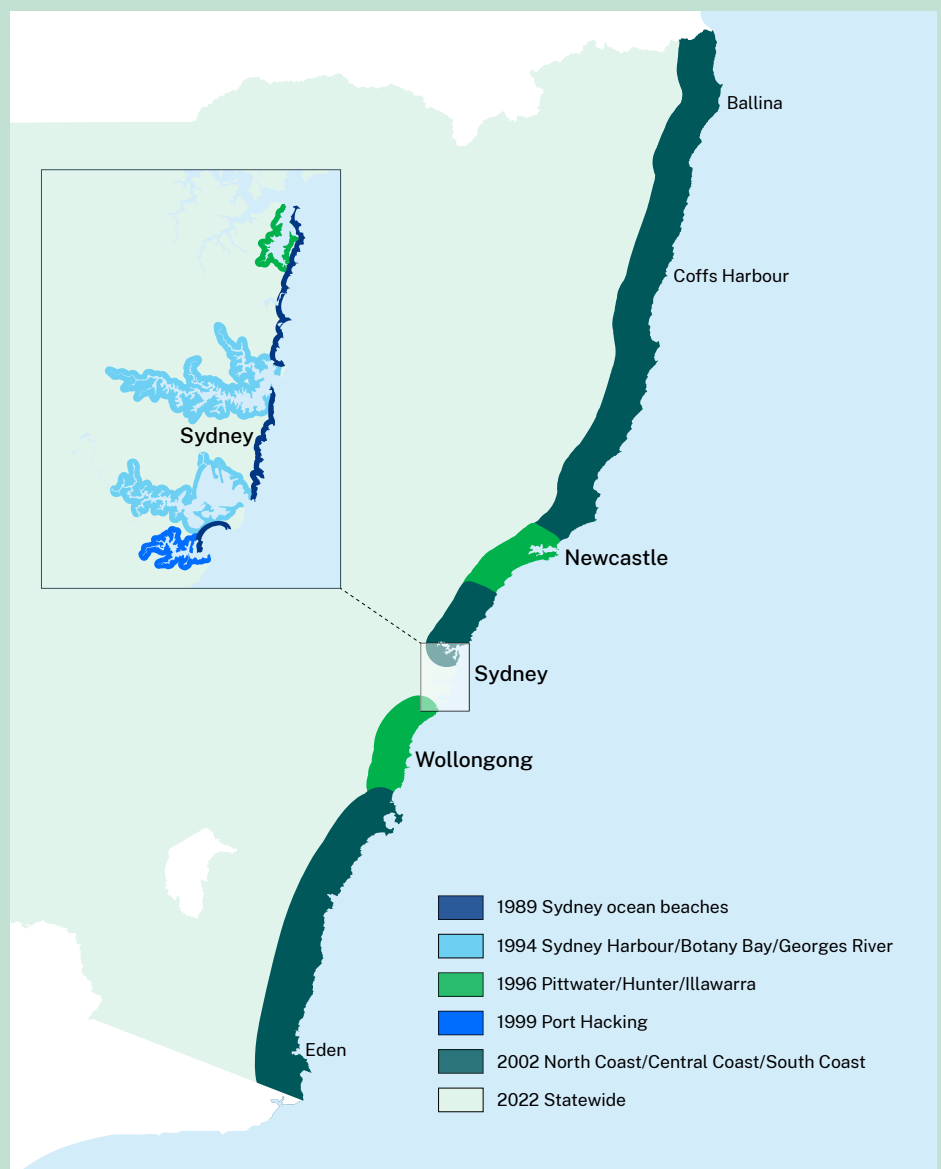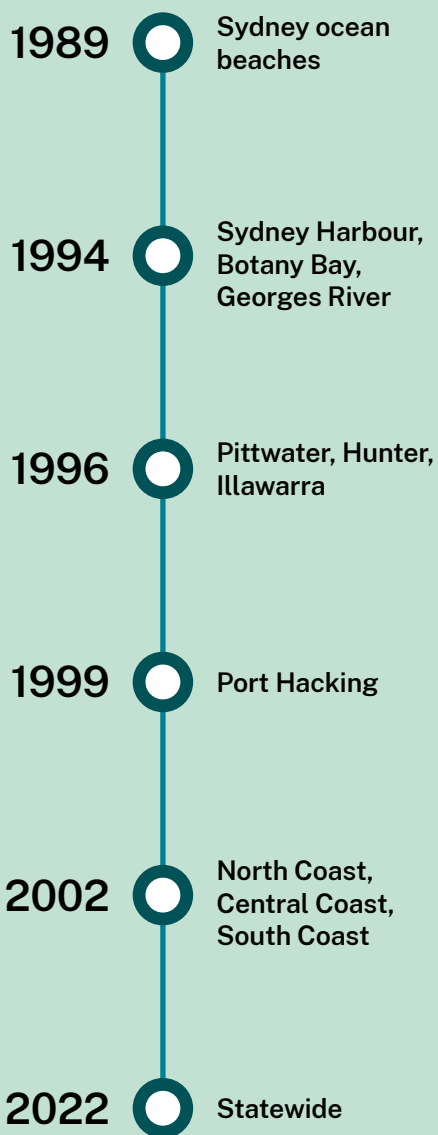
Timeline

Beachwatch has been helping the community make informed decisions about where and when to swim for over 30 years.

During this time, Beachwatch has grown from Sydney's ocean beaches and estuaries to swimming sites in regional areas along the NSW coast, in partnership with coastal councils.

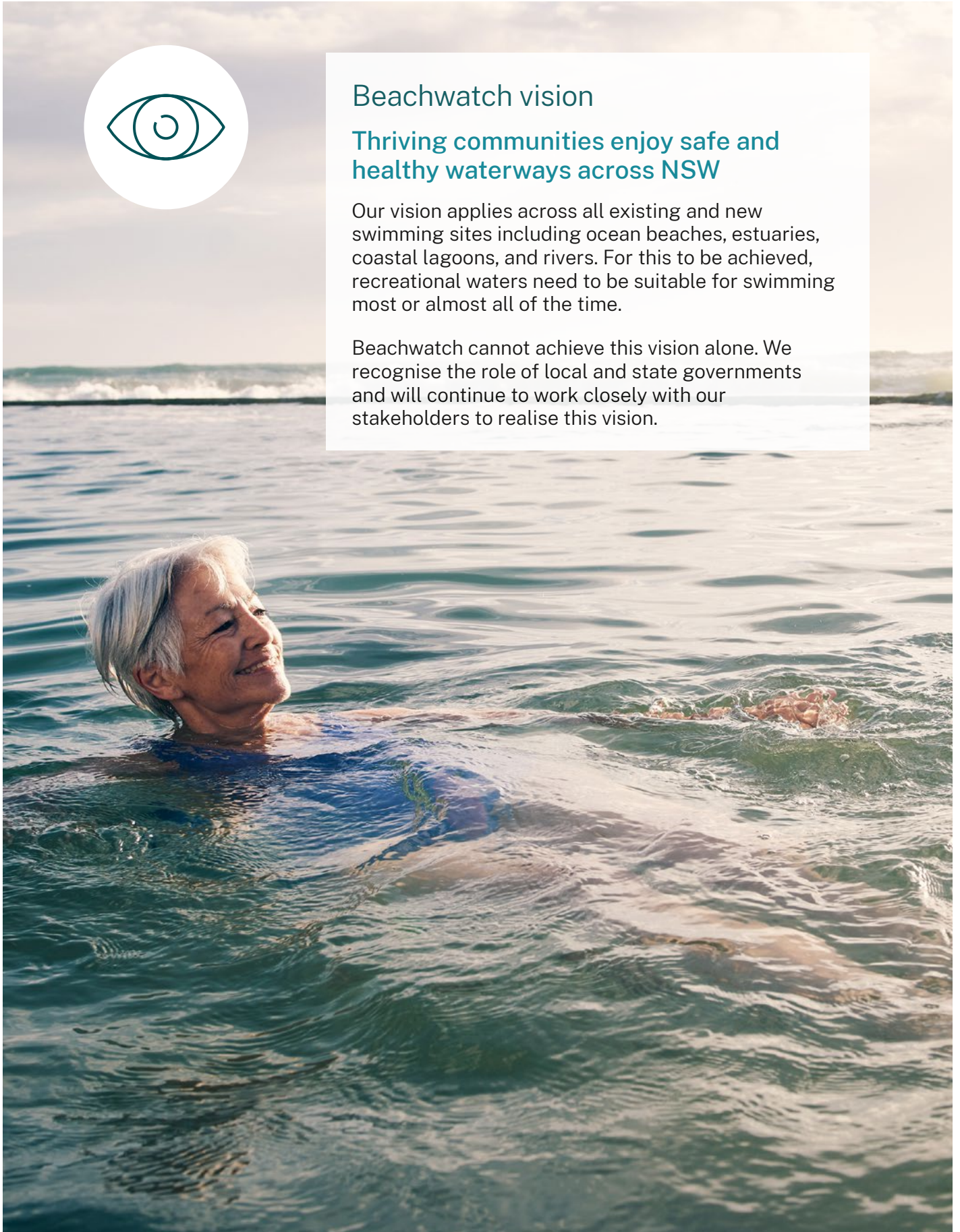Beachwatch is now moving to the next phase and expanding state-wide to rivers and waterways across NSW.

1989 Sydney ocean beaches

1994 Sydney Harbour, Botany Bay, Georges River

1996 Pittwater, Hunter, Illawarra

1999 Port Hacking

2002 North Coast, Central Coast, South Coast

2022 Statewide

Ballina

Coffs Harbour

Newcastle

Sydney

Wollongong

Eden

Sydney

- 1989 Sydney ocean beaches
- 1994 Sydney Harbour/Botany Bay/Georges River
- 1996 Pittwater/Hunter/Illawarra
- 1999 Port Hacking
- 2002 North Coast/Central Coast/South Coast
- 2022 Statewide

Our vision for the future: 2022–2032

Beachwatch vision

Thriving communities enjoy safe and healthy waterways across NSW

Our vision applies across all existing and new swimming sites including ocean beaches, estuaries, coastal lagoons, and rivers. For this to be achieved, recreational waters need to be suitable for swimming most or almost all of the time.

Beachwatch cannot achieve this vision alone. We recognise the role of local and state governments and will continue to work closely with our stakeholders to realise this vision.

Beachwatch mission

Deliver trusted reporting about swim sites and support the NSW public to make informed decisions about using recreational waters

The Beachwatch mission supports the achievement of our vision for recreational waters. It requires recreational waters to be monitored and assessed in accordance with National Health and Medical Research Council guidelines for managing risks in recreational waters.

This mission is delivered through providing rigorous, transparent, evidence-based advice about a swim site's performance as it tracks towards a Good or Very good beach grade.

Beachwatch purpose

Enable positive change for recreational waters and the health and wellbeing of NSW communities

Safe and healthy waterways provide essential services and functions to support environmental, social and economic outcomes, including more liveable cities and healthy, resilient communities. When it comes to maintaining safe and healthy waterways, Beachwatch will enable smarter and more informed decisions to help manage them more effectively, in collaboration with local and state governments.

Beachwatch already makes information available in real time about many swimming sites in coastal and estuarine settings, enabling local water users to make informed decisions about if and where they swim. This plan will expand the program's reach to deliver these benefits more equally and equitably to communities across NSW.

Beachwatch principles

Beachwatch advice is **accessible, simple** and **easy to understand**

To ensure our advice is clear, we use plain language. We ensure our communications are accessible, providing equal access to information, with special consideration for people with disabilities.

Beachwatch information is **timely**

Beachwatch provides daily advice on swim site suitability for people to choose if and when to swim.

Beachwatch data is **trustworthy**

Data is the pillar of credibility for Beachwatch. Our quality assurance program ensures the information collected and reported by Beachwatch and our partners is accurate and reliable, with all high-quality data publicly available from our centralised database.

Beachwatch delivery is **collaborative**

Collaboration between state and local governments is fundamental to the delivery of the Beachwatch program to deliver benefits more equally and equitably to communities across NSW.

Beachwatch measures in accordance with **national guidelines**

Beachwatch monitoring makes sure National Health and Medical Research Council guidelines are followed to ensure consistent state-wide reporting so councils can feel confident that sites are suitable for swimming and human health risks are assessed.

Beachwatch is **relevant to waterway management**

The monitoring program will provide water quality data that councils can use to identify issues and evaluate the outcomes of actions to improve water quality, including those contained within Coastal Management Programs developed in accordance with the *Coastal Management Act 2016*.

State of the Beaches reports are highly valued by stakeholders and identified as a powerful tool for Councils and Ministers to use in addressing community concerns and also in identifying areas for additional action.

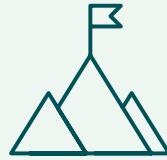**Independent Assurance Review, 2021**

Overview

Vision

Thriving communities enjoy safe and healthy waterways across NSW

Mission

Deliver trusted reporting about swim sites and support the NSW public to make informed decisions about using recreational waters

Purpose

Enable positive change for recreational waters and the health and wellbeing of NSW communities

Program goals by 2032

Goal 1

Improved Beachwatch partner support and community reporting

Focus areas:

1. Prepare our systems and processes to scale up
2. Use technology to increase our capacity and develop a new reporting system

Goal 2

Increase the number of monitored swim sites through the partnership program

Focus areas:

1. Use partnerships to facilitate expansion
2. Prioritise swim sites for monitoring
3. Prioritise stakeholder engagement

Our program goals by 2032

Goal 1

Improved Beachwatch partner support and community reporting

With a significant proportion of the NSW population based on the coast or along river systems, waterways are a central part of many of our lives. Our interaction with waterways, and the health benefits we gain from them, are directly linked to the quality of the water.

The expansion of Beachwatch to a state-wide program will support local governments to meet demand for information on safe local swim sites for communities across NSW, so people can make informed decisions about their health and wellbeing.

An expanded program requires providing support to partners, and improved reporting for communities.

There are 2 focus areas under this goal:

1

Prepare our systems and processes to scale up

Beachwatch will improve our support program by focusing on state-wide coordination, centralised data management, quality assurance and training, to ensure partners such as local government and wastewater managers can easily participate in the program.

2

Use technology to increase our capacity including a new reporting system

Beachwatch will deliver a modernised reporting system using innovative software to make reporting simpler and more cost-effective for local government. The reporting system will be future proofed, easy to manage and maintain, with automated processes to increase efficiency, delivering the next generation of Beachwatch. We will provide a better experience by understanding user needs to deliver a public facing website that is easy to use, with engaging, evidence-based information that drives advocacy and adoption within the community.

Goal 2

Increase the number of monitored swim sites through the partnership program

Beachwatch monitoring has driven significant water quality improvements along the coast of NSW since the program began. However, many more recreational locations are yet to be assessed for swimming suitability.

Over the next 10 years, Beachwatch will expand the number of partners actively monitoring locations for swimming and increase the number of people using water quality information. Strong partnerships with local governments, government agencies and wastewater managers are critical to achieving success.

There are 3 prioritised focus areas under this goal:

1 Use partnerships to facilitate expansion

Beachwatch will expand its program by partnering with and supporting councils to monitor and report water quality to ensure the health and wellbeing of communities and the environment. By providing protocols and frameworks for assessment and management of risks in recreational waters, we will work to increase the capacity of local government to support monitoring programs and ensure consistent state-wide reporting compliant with national guidelines.

2 Prioritise swim sites for monitoring

Beachwatch and its partners will use site-specific risk data, by assessing safe access, physical hazards and contaminants to prioritise sites for inclusion in the monitoring program. Existing waterway use and water quality objectives will also be considered to meet community demand for access to safe swim sites.

3 Prioritise stakeholder engagement

Beachwatch will develop engaging and helpful relationships for local government and the community by clear and effective communication to make information easier to access and increase the number of users of water quality information across the state. Beachwatch will focus on understanding our stakeholders, anticipating their needs and adopting a multichannel communication strategy to expand our reach across the state.

Beachwatch is recognised as a source of expertise, advice, support and training.

Independent Assurance Review, 2021

Next steps

The NSW Government is committed to the continuous improvement of the Beachwatch program, and ensuring its benefits are delivered more equally and equitably to communities across NSW.

To achieve this, the program will implement targeted activities across the 2 goals, backed by monitoring, evaluation, reporting and continuous improvement of program design and delivery.

Above all else, Beachwatch will collaborate to achieve outcomes within government, with councils and with the many stakeholders who share our vision for thriving communities enjoying safe and healthy waterways across NSW.

Contact us

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