

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-4704

July 28, 2016

COMMITTEES:  
APPROPRIATIONS  
BUDGET  
HEALTH, EDUCATION, LABOR,  
AND PENSIONS  
VETERANS' AFFAIRS

Mr. Thomas Bach  
President  
The International Olympic Committee  
Chateau de Vidy  
Case Postale 356  
1001 Lausanne  
Switzerland

Dear Mr. Bach,

More than 10,000 athletes will soon compete in the Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Nearly 1,400 of those athletes will participate in a water sport, including triathletes, swimmers, sailors, canoers, and rowers. In Brazil's 2009 bid to the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to host the 2016 summer games, the country pledged to collect and treat 80 percent of their sewage water to ensure minimal contamination in the recreational water sites. According to independent sampling of the water by the Associated Press (AP) and a June report from the Council on Hemispheric Affairs, the recreational water to be used by athletes remains significantly contaminated. Exposure to contaminated water through breathing it in or consuming it can result in a number of negative health outcomes, including gastrointestinal and respiratory illness. As athletes from around the world give their all in water sports to inspire children and families and make their communities proud, the last thing they should have to worry about is contamination that could jeopardize their health. I strongly urge you to ramp up efforts with the Government of Brazil to take the necessary, critical precautions to protect the health and well-being of the 555 members of the U.S. Olympic Team, 16 from my home state of Washington, and Olympic athletes and spectators from all over the world through education and expedited de-contamination of the water sites.

As you know, the U.S. Olympic Committee is independent and not an agency of the United States government, and I am not writing to you at the request of the U.S. Olympic Committee. However, as the Democratic leader of the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions, I have oversight responsibility over public health. As such, I am deeply concerned about the dangerous levels of water contamination in Rio de Janeiro's Olympic arenas.

Multiple assessments of the recreational water in Brazil have revealed that the water quality is not safe for consumption and is contaminated with both harmful bacteria and viruses. The AP's independent investigation into the water quality in 2015 found that viruses from human sewage were at levels "up to 1.7 million times what would be considered highly alarming in US or Europe." More recently, two unpublished academic studies have reported the presence of the "super bacteria" *Klebsiella pneumoniae* carbapenemase (KPC) off the beaches of Rio de Janeiro,

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where Olympic water events will take place.<sup>[1]</sup> The presence of this bacteria is thought to be a result of illegal dumping of hospital waste or an overabundance of human sewage in the water. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, this super bacteria can cause meningitis and pulmonary, bloodstream, urinary and GI infections.<sup>[2]</sup> As athletes and spectators are exposed to the water and become ill, this bacteria could be introduced into the hospital and healthcare settings around Rio.

As we near opening day, I urge you to continue to educate athletes and spectators and communicate the risks associated with exposure to the water, including signs and symptoms of possible waterborne illness. In addition, I encourage you to assess the Olympic water sites on a regular basis through a combination of sanitary inspections to determine possible sources of pollution, as well as microbial water quality testing in accordance with the World Health Organization's guidance. Lastly, it is critical that all athletes receive the recommended vaccinations that are advised for all travelers to Brazil, as a number of the vaccines, including typhoid and hepatitis A, will also reduce risks of illness from exposure to poor recreational water quality.

The Olympics are a prestigious event that will garner world-wide attention. It's important that our athletes from Washington State, the United States, and around the world can compete in as safe and healthy an environment as possible.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



Patty Murray  
United States Senator

<sup>[1]</sup> Sigrid, J. (June 15, 2016). Super bacteria in Rio de Janeiro's Olympic arenas. *Council on Hemispheric Affairs*. Available at: <http://www.coha.org/super-bacteria-in-rio-de-janeiros-olympic-arenas/>

<sup>[2]</sup> Ibid.