

Overloaded and Underfunded: Central Alabama's Aging Infrastructure Needs a Clean Water Trust Fund

America's clean water systems – the pipes, sewers, and treatment facilities that keep our society afloat – are in serious trouble. The federal government estimates that every year we fall more than \$20 billion short of what is needed to maintain and improve our water infrastructure.¹

States and localities, grappling with tight budgets and projected future needs far beyond projected funding capabilities, have traditionally relied on the federal government to support continued access to this essential public resource. However, money for the federal Clean Water State Revolving Fund, which supports state and local efforts, is drying up, leaving governments, utilities, and citizens struggling to clean up the mess.

Across the country, the consequences of inadequate infrastructure investment are already being felt – as many as 75,000 times a year, according to the Environmental Protection Agency, which says that sewage overflows from poorly-designed or degraded systems emit 1.26 trillion gallons of untreated filth annually.² These overflows, which cost more than \$50 billion a year in cleanup costs, are not sent to some faraway wilderness; they are spilling into our local streams and beaches, our homes, and the source water we eventually drink.³

“[The facilities] weren’t designed to do the treatments they’re required to do today. The standards have gotten a lot stricter.”

– Gene Smith, Planning Director,
West Alabama Regional
Commission



In Your Backyard: In 1996, a federal judge ordered Jefferson County, home of Birmingham, to repair and upgrade its sewer system, which had been pouring raw and partially treated sewage into nearby lakes and streams for years. In response to the lawsuit filed by EPA, the Cahaba River Society and three residents, the county took on a \$3.3 billion sewer restoration project to upgrade and repair their broken, leaky system. Cracked pipes allow rainwater to enter the sanitary sewer lines and cause sewage to overflow into waterways. The county has completed the bulk of the repairs to its system, but it's still not free of overflows. Every month, tens of thousands of gallons of untreated sewage spill into waterways.⁴

Furthermore, the county plans to build a new sewer line from Bessemer to Hoover with a price tag of \$200 million over 10 years. The costs of these repairs will fall on Jefferson County customers, whose rates are expected to continue to increase for years.⁵

Selma has similar problems. Residents reported a sewage overflow in their backyards, likely from a broken pipe, in December 2007. It was not the first time these residents had to endure the stench of sewage leaking from Selma's old water system.⁶ The largest water plant, located on Water Avenue, was built in the late 1800s and has had only one major repair, performed in the 1950s. A 2006 assessment slated a need for \$5 million in capital improvements to the plant. And, as a consulting engineer described, "if we don't make the improvements, it's going to cost a whole lot more in the future." Selma residents will see increases in their sewer bills to fund the improvements to this plant and other places around the city.⁷

The story is similar in Tuscaloosa, where 525 miles of concrete sewage pipes are laden with cracks and root damage. Tuscaloosa's Water and Sewer Department Director, Maurice Sledge, explains, "We have a big system, and a system as old as ours is always going to have problems... It's a perpetual job." The city is going through the process of identifying the pipes in greatest need of repair, and will start repairing those. But it will be costly. City officials recently approved a \$1 million rehabilitation project that repairs just four miles of pipes.⁸

Even small towns, including Akron, Carrollton and Cuba, are facing EPA fines for discharging wastewater into the state's streams. Their outdated systems are unable to perform the treatment necessary to meet the newer, more stringent EPA water quality standards. The costs of repairing and updating sewer infrastructure overwhelm the tax base of these small communities. Carrollton, a town of 384 households, needs \$800,000 to dredge a sewage lagoon and install ultraviolet lights. Although the



town secured grants to pay for a portion of the repairs, Carrollton residents' sewer rates are expected to increase by almost 100 percent.⁹

Absent a much-needed increase in federal support, families across western Alabama will see their sewer rates continue to climb.

EPA's most recent assessment of the Cahaba, Locust, Lower Alabama, Lower Black Warrior, Lower Tombigbee, Luxapallila, Middle Alabama, Middle Coosa, Middle Tombigbee-Chickasaw, Middle Tombigbee-Lubbub, Mulberry, Noxubee, Sipsey, Sucarnoochee, Upper Alabama, Upper Black Warrior and Upper Chickasawhay watersheds found 207 individual impairments to water quality, including fecal coliform bacteria, other pathogens and solid trash.¹⁰

Across Alabama: According to EPA, 75 percent of river miles and 25 percent of lakes suffer from impaired water quality. Additionally, 100 percent of Alabama's estuaries and bays are considered impaired.¹¹ Meanwhile, a report by the Natural Resources Defense Council shows nationwide beach closings and swimming advisories were at an all-time high in 2006. Alabama experienced 44 closure or advisory events lasting six weeks or fewer in 2006, up significantly from 27 in 2005.¹²

Yet while the needs are apparent, the funding to keep our water clean and safe is drying up. Partisan divisions in the annual appropriations process keep resources from reaching our communities. While the amount that a single family pays for wastewater services has increased by about double the rate of inflation nationwide,¹³ overall federal contributions to the State Revolving Fund have gone the other way. In Alabama, the state's clean water funding efforts have decreased by 47.8 percent since 1991—nearly 66 percent when adjusted for inflation.¹⁴

Alabama's most recent Intended Use Plan lists a one-year need of 12 projects costing \$37.1 million. The state's 2007

"I feel sorry for anyone going through this right now. The federal government isn't doing too much to help. I wish there was something the federal government would do in helping us look at a system that would accommodate smaller communities."

— Roy Dobbs, Berry Mayor

“These sewer rates will continue to go up, and they are not going to stop.”

– Gary White,
Jefferson County Commissioner

federal clean water allotment, meanwhile, amounted to just \$12 million.¹⁵ EPA’s most recent Clean Watershed Needs survey determined that Alabama would require more than \$3.513 billion in infrastructure funding over the next 20 years.¹⁶

Time for a Federal Clean Water Trust Fund

Given the fickle year-to-year availability of clean water funding and the urgency of our needs, we have to find a new solution. Our problems are not just local; watersheds are linked, and one community’s water flows downstream to become another’s. Neither are our resources; water belongs to all of us, and clean, healthy, affordable public water is every community’s right. So the best answer would cover Alabama and the entire nation, ensure steady, reliable funding to meet future needs, liberate the process from partisan bickering, and avoid penalizing ratepayers.

A federal clean water trust fund would do just that, guaranteeing clean water for generations to come. By sidestepping the contentious appropriations process, a trust fund would safeguard our infrastructure, our environment, and our economy – all without adding to the national debt. For more information on keeping clean water a reality, consult Food & Water Watch’s report *Clear Waters: Why America Needs a Clean Water Trust Fund*, available at www.foodandwaterwatch.org/water/americaswater/clearwaters.

Endnotes

¹ “The Clean Water and Drinking Water Gap Analysis.” Office of Water, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Sept. 30, 2002. Available at www.epa.gov/safewater/gapreport.pdf

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¹² “Testing the Waters: A Guide to Water Quality at Vacation Beaches.” Natural Resources Defense Council, Washington, D.C., August 2007.

¹³ “Residential Service Charges Outpace Inflation for Sixth Straight Year.” National Association of Clean Water Agencies, 2007.

¹⁴ “Clean Water State Revolving Fund Allotments.” Office of Water, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Apr. 4, 2007. Available at www.epa.gov/owm/cwfinance/cwsrf/cwsrfallots.pdf

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