

Overloaded and Underfunded: Northwestern California'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

“This is a problem we have been having with the old sewage collection system. We have had a series of these spills over the years.”

– Tim Anderson, a Sonoma County Water Agency spokesperson¹⁷



In Your Backyard: Aging and struggling sewer systems have spilled wastewater in many places along California's northern coast. Sonoma Valley had three separate sewage overflows in just the first two months of 2008. On January 4, heavy rains twice overburdened the sewer collection system, sending wastewater into the streets.⁴ A month later, heavy rains again caused sewage to overflow, spilling around 50,000 gallons of wastewater into creeks that lead to San Pablo Bay.⁵

The situation in Mendocino County is even worse. In the past five years, the county had 18 sewage overflow violations – more than any other county in the state of California. Three of these violations occurred in just the last year, including one in the city of Ukiah.⁶

Overloaded piping is not Ukiah's only problem. Its treatment capacity also is faltering. At the end of April 2008, the city received a \$27,000 fine for inadequately treating its wastewater over the preceding eight years.⁷



Ukiah is trying to correct these problems. For example, the city launched a \$58 million improvement project to update its 50-year-old wastewater treatment plant and replace 100-year-old piping.⁸ The Sonoma Valley Sanitation District has begun a similar program to replace its 50-year-old sewer piping,⁹ and it plans to spend \$75 million on sanitation projects over the next five years through 2012.¹⁰

Meanwhile, households across the region must pick up the tab for these necessary but expensive upgrades. By July of this year, Sonoma Valley plans to increase sewer fees by seven percent, increasing the typical household's

“The collection system is overwhelmed. The system work we are doing will help.”

– Cordel Stillman, capital projects manager for the Sonoma County Water Agency¹⁸

annual bill to \$618.¹¹ Absent a much-needed increase in federal support, rate hikes will become common along the state's northern coast.

EPA's most recent assessment of the 22 watersheds in northwestern California found 130 individual impairments to water quality, including temperature, sediment and pathogens.¹²

Across California: Statewide, EPA says that 93 percent of California's assessed river miles and lakes suffer from impaired water quality. Additionally, 78 percent of waters do not support fish consumption, and nearly all of the state's bays and estuaries are seriously hampered.¹³

Yet while the needs are apparent, the funding to keep our water clean and safe is drying up. Overall federal contributions to the state's clean water funding efforts have decreased by 47.8 percent since 1991 – nearly 66 percent when adjusted for inflation.¹⁴

California's water needs outpace its current ability to fund projects by a large margin. The state's most recent Clean Water State Revolving Fund Intended Use Plan lists 691 projects at a total cost of \$10.5 billion over the next five years. In 2007, the state received \$76.5 million in federal funding – enough to finance 1/137th of its needs.¹⁵ EPA estimates California's current wastewater spending needs at \$18.17 billion.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 California 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.

“We have a wastewater plant project because we know we have improvements that need to be made.”

– Ann Burck, interim water and sewer operations superintendent for Ukiah¹⁹

Endnotes

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⁶ Violation Report Form – County, Violations SSO, 2003-2008, State Water Resources Control Board, California Environmental Protection Agency. Available at <http://ciwqs.waterboards.ca.gov/ciwqs/readOnly/ciwqsReportViolationCriteria.jsp?command=resetCriteria&placeType=COUNTY>

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¹⁷ Norberg, Bob. “Sonoma Valley sewage spill fouls creeks leading to bay,” *The Press Democrat* (Santa Rosa), Feb. 5, 2008.

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For more information:

web: www.foodandwaterwatch.org

email: foodandwater@fwwatch.org

phone: (202) 683-2500

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