

Overloaded and Underfunded: Representative Tauscher's District'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

“You want to make sure that water and wastewater infrastructure is properly maintained, but it puts us in a catch-22. The entire City Council is absolutely reluctant to do any rate increases. On the other hand, we have to maintain the public health. Somewhere in there is the balance.”

– Donald Freitas, mayor of Antioch¹⁶



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

In Your Backyard: Every day the Central Contra Costa Sanitary District treats 45 million gallons of wastewater collected through 1,500 miles of pipelines from 440,000 residents and businesses.⁴ It will cost the district \$340 million to meet its sewage needs over the next 10 years.⁵ These expensive but necessary improvements forced the district to increase sewer rates by 4 percent last July.⁶

Nearby, in Antioch, city officials are weighing whether they should follow suit and increase water and sewer fees. City staff had proposed to increase water rates by



7 percent and wastewater rates by 3.5 percent to pay for improvement projects. City officials, however, are hesitant to approve these hikes. While acknowledging the importance of these upgrades and repairs, the city council and mayor worry that the higher fees would be unaffordable for many residents who are already weathering tough economic times.⁷

Fairfield-Suisun Sewer District has made great strides to keep wastewater service affordable for its residents. In January 2008, the sewer district voted to kick out its corporate operator and bring the management and operation of its sewer system in-house,⁸ estimating cost savings of 10 to 15 percent.⁹ Savings from public operation will help, but the sewer district still needs \$91 million in major improvement projects over the next 10 years.¹⁰

Absent a much needed boost in federal support, cities across California will have to make this difficult decision of whether to forgo necessary repairs or to increase rates to a level that may be unaffordable for many families.

EPA's most recent assessment of the five watersheds in the region – Suisun Bay, San Pablo Bay, San Joaquin

“I don't want [Antioch] to be known as the city that has the highest water rates.”

—Arne Simonsen, Antioch city council member¹⁸

Delta, San Francisco Bay and Lower Sacramento – found 145 individual impairments to water quality, including pathogens, pesticides and sediment toxicity.¹¹

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.¹²

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.¹³

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.¹⁴ EPA estimates California's current wastewater spending needs at \$18.17 billion.¹⁵

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,

“As Californians, we know how precious every drop of water is.”
– Ellen Tauscher, D-Antioch²⁰

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

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- ⁴ Samaniego, Danielle. “Central County sewage rates rise – sanitary district increases prices by 3.8 percent for the second time in three years,” *Contra Costa Times*, July 19, 2007.
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- ⁶ Samaniego, Danielle. “Central County sewage rates rise – sanitary district increases prices by 3.8 percent for the second time in three years,” *Contra Costa Times*, July 19, 2007.
- ⁷ Read, Simon. “Water rates increase in limbo,” *East County Times* (Antioch), March 1, 2008.
- ⁸ Eberling, Barry. “Sewage board to have district run plant.” *Fairfield Daily Republic*, Jan. 29, 2008.
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- ¹⁰ “2007/08 Budget and long-term financial plan.” Fairfield-Suisun Sewer District, June 25, 2007, p. 6.
- ¹¹ “Surf Your Watershed.” Office of Water, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Available at: <http://cfpub.epa.gov/surf/locate/index.cfm>



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- ¹⁵ “Clean Watershed Needs Survey 2004, Report to Congress.” Office of Wastewater Management, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, January 2008. Available at: www.epa.gov/owm/mtb/cwns/2004rtc/toc.htm
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- ¹⁹ Samaniego, Danielle. “Central County sewage rates rise – sanitary district increases prices by 3.8 percent for the second time in three years,” *Contra Costa Times*, July 19, 2007.
- ²⁰ Doyle, Michael. “House approves McNerney’s water bill.” *The Record* (Stockton), March 9, 2007.

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