

# Overloaded and Underfunded: Los Angeles'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.<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

**In Your Backyard:** Los Angeles is home to the nation's largest wastewater collection system, serving more than

*“The city should be able to provide basic city service. This isn't a Third World city. We should be able to do better.”*

– Fran Diamond, chairwoman, Los Angeles Regional Water Quality Board



4 million users and encompassing 6,700 miles of sewers, 140,000 maintenance holes and 46 pumping stations.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, this system is old and damaged.

Without major repairs, the 80-year-old clean water infrastructure will continue to spill raw sewage on streets and private property. These spills are one of the region's greatest public health concerns. Between 1994 and 2004, there were more than 4,500 separate overflows.<sup>5</sup> In one instance, rainwater seeped into the city's cracked pipelines and 39 million gallons of sewage water flowed onto city streets.<sup>6</sup>

After this massive spill in 1998, an environmental group, later joined by EPA, sued the city of Los Angeles. In August 2004, the city lost the lawsuit and had to pay a record \$2 billion settlement for violating the Clean Water Act and state water pollution laws. As part of the settlement, Los Angeles pledged to rebuild nearly 500 miles



*“It doesn’t take a public health expert to know that raw sewage running in the streets, running in driveways, getting on lawns, seeping into cellars, is bad for the public’s health. Raw sewage carries viruses like hepatitis.”*

*— Jonathan Fielding, Los Angeles’s director of public health*

**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.<sup>13</sup>

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.<sup>14</sup>

of sewer lines, clean 2,800 miles of sewers each year and plan for future expansion.<sup>7</sup> The latter will be an intensive endeavor. To keep up with its burgeoning population, the city will need to double its wastewater treatment capacity by 2020.<sup>8</sup>

The cost of all these repairs and upgrades will be great. The city will have to pay more than half a billion dollars to meet its future sewage demands,<sup>9</sup> and the city intends to spend another \$1.5 billion on water recycling and conservation programs, which would reduce the burden on the sewer system.<sup>10</sup> Even small projects are expensive. For example, a proposed six-mile sewer line through Griffith Park is expected to set the city back \$150 million.<sup>11</sup>

Meanwhile, the bill for these necessary upgrades is falling on local users. Absent a much-needed increase in federal support, families across Los Angeles will see their sewer rates grow.

EPA’s most recent assessment of the Santa Monica Bay and Los Angeles watersheds found 33 unique impairments to water quality, including fecal coliform bacteria, lead and zinc.<sup>12</sup>

California’s water needs dwarf its current ability to fund projects. 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.<sup>15</sup> EPA, meanwhile, estimates California’s current wastewater spending needs at \$18.17 billion.<sup>16</sup>

## **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.

*“It’s a difficult situation. No matter what we do, there’s going to be a cost increase.”*

*– Tom LeBrun, head of planning,  
Los Angeles County Sanitation  
District, speaking about a proposed  
sewage plant expansion*

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](http://www.foodandwaterwatch.org/water/americaswater/clearwaters).

#### **Endnotes**

- <sup>1</sup> “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](http://www.epa.gov/safewater/gapreport.pdf)
- <sup>2</sup> “Implementation and Enforcement of the Combined Sewer Overflow Control Policy.” Office of Water, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, December 2001. Available at: [http://cfpub.epa.gov/npdes/cso/cpolicy\\_report.cfm](http://cfpub.epa.gov/npdes/cso/cpolicy_report.cfm)
- <sup>3</sup> “Clean Watershed Needs Survey 2000, Report to Congress.” Office of Wastewater Management, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, August 2003. Available at: [www.epa.gov/owm/mtb/cwns/2000rtc/toc.htm](http://www.epa.gov/owm/mtb/cwns/2000rtc/toc.htm)
- <sup>4</sup> Whitaker, Barbara. “Los Angeles Admits Fault In Sewer Spills Cited in Suit,” *New York Times*, April 23, 2003.
- <sup>5</sup> “U.S. announces \$2 billion sewage spill agreement for City of Los Angeles,” U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Aug. 6, 2004.
- <sup>6</sup> McGreevy, Patrick. “Sewage Spills Trigger proposals; L.A. official face residents’ anger, potential fines,” *Daily News* (Los Angeles), March 12, 1998.
- <sup>7</sup> U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 2004, op. cit.
- <sup>8</sup> Mascaró, Lisa. “Sewer project creates a stink; Residents concerned about impact of line,” *The Daily News* (Los Angeles), Feb. 28, 2006.



<sup>9</sup> Sewage discharge violations, searchable database – Los Angeles, California, January 2003 – February 2008, Gannett News Service. Available at <http://data.gannettnewsservice.com/sewers/start7.php>.

<sup>10</sup> “Mayor unveils far-reaching 20-year water strategy for LA,” Mayor’s Office, Los Angeles, available at [www.lacity.org/mayor/iee\\_waterplan.htm](http://www.lacity.org/mayor/iee_waterplan.htm).

<sup>11</sup> Mascaró, Lisa, op. cit.

<sup>12</sup> “Surf Your Watershed.” Office of Water, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Available at: <http://cfpub.epa.gov/surf/locate/index.cfm>

<sup>13</sup> “2002 National Assessment Database.” U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Available at: [www.epa.gov/waters/305b/index\\_2002.html](http://www.epa.gov/waters/305b/index_2002.html)

<sup>14</sup> “Clean Water State Revolving Fund Allotments.” Office of Water, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, April 4, 2007. Available at [www.epa.gov/owm/cwfinance/cwsrf/cwsrfallots.pdf](http://www.epa.gov/owm/cwfinance/cwsrf/cwsrfallots.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> “State of California Clean Water State Revolving Fund Final Intended Use Plan for State Fiscal Year 2006/2007.” State Water Resources Control Board, California Environmental Protection Agency, May 1, 2007. Available at: [www.waterboards.ca.gov/water\\_issues/programs/grants\\_loans/srf/docs/final2007iup.pdf](http://www.waterboards.ca.gov/water_issues/programs/grants_loans/srf/docs/final2007iup.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> “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](http://www.epa.gov/owm/mtb/cwns/2004rtc/toc.htm)

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