

# Overloaded and Underfunded: San Francisco'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:** San Francisco is in serious clean water trouble. Its sewer system is outdated and dilapidated. The old combined wastewater and stormwater

*“Although [the sewer pipes have] lasted this long, they’re old, and they’ve got plenty of problems.”*

*– Raymond Mattias, operations supervisor of the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission<sup>15</sup>*



system cannot handle heavy rains and frequently floods low-lying communities.

Many families can attest to the trauma of watching personal belongings wash away in a deluge of slimy, dirty water. In October 2004, a strong storm swept the city, overburdening the sewer system in the Sunset District. Manhole covers popped and toilets overflowed. A foot and a half of wastewater rushed down streets, driveways and basements.<sup>4</sup> Until the city completes major improvement work, the best it can do for these families and businesses is distribute sandbags before the next storm hits.<sup>5</sup>

This is not the end of San Francisco's water woes. As its 70-year-old sewer lines crumble, the city must make nearly 500 repairs each year, such as replacing mains, patching breaks and dealing with cave-ins. Faulty pipes are bad enough, but one San Francisco treatment plant fares no better. Built in the 1950s, the Southeast plant emits a revolting stench on hot days.<sup>6</sup>



*“I don’t think people want our sewer system to remain in a precarious state. To me, it’s a no-brainer. Without a working sewer system, without a working water system, you don’t have a city.”*

*– Susan Lea, general manager,  
San Francisco Public Utilities  
Commission<sup>16</sup>*

Because of these problems, the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission plans to spend around \$4 billion over the next few years to improve its wastewater system.<sup>7</sup> While surely worthwhile, these upgrades come at a hefty price – paid mostly from the pockets of San Franciscans.

In 2002, after capping water and sewer rates for four years, city residents voted to remove the rate caps and allow the utilities commission to issue bonds to make necessary improvements.<sup>8</sup> The commission wasted no time. In 2005 it unanimously voted to increase water and sewer rates 20 percent to pay for a backlog of maintenance and repair work accumulated during the rate freeze.<sup>9</sup> Absent a much-needed increase in federal support, these rates will only continue to climb.

EPA’s most recent assessment of the San Pablo Bay and the San Francisco Bay watersheds found 71 unique impairments to water quality, including contaminated sediments, pathogens and trash.<sup>10</sup>

**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 waterways do not support fish consumption, and nearly all of the state’s bays and estuaries are seriously hampered.<sup>11</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>12</sup>

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.<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, EPA estimates California’s current wastewater spending needs at \$18.17 billion.<sup>14</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.

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

*“The city’s storm sewer system once again backed up, and once again, we got flooded.”*

*– Paula Bauer, a resident of San Francisco’s Sunset District, whose house was flooded in October 2004, for the fifth time since 1997<sup>17</sup>*

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> Cabanatuan, Michael. “Drano can’t fix this rainy-day headache.” *San Francisco Chronicle*, Oct. 27, 2004.

<sup>5</sup> Goodyear, Charlie. “Sandbag giveaway for flood-prone areas.” *San Francisco Chronicle*, Nov. 19, 2004.

<sup>6</sup> Gordon, Rachel. “Ailing city sewers on fix-it list.” *San Francisco Chronicle*, March 20, 2006.

<sup>7</sup> “Sewer system master plan,” Wastewater Enterprise, San Francisco Public Utilities Commission, May 27, 2008, p. 29.

<sup>8</sup> Gordon, Rachel, op. cit.

<sup>9</sup> Lelchuk, Ilene. “PUC votes steep hike in water, sewer bills.” *San Francisco Chronicle*, March 23, 2005.

<sup>10</sup> “Surf Your Watershed.” Office of Water, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Available at: <http://cfpub.epa.gov/surf/locate/index.cfm>



<sup>11</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>12</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>13</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>14</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)

<sup>15</sup> Gordon, Rachel. “Ailing city sewers on fix-it list.” *San Francisco Chronicle*, March 20, 2006.

<sup>16</sup> Gordon, Rachel. “Ailing city sewers on fix-it list.” *San Francisco Chronicle*, March 20, 2006.

<sup>17</sup> Goodyear, Charlie. “Sandbag giveaway for flood-prone areas.” *San Francisco Chronicle*, Nov. 19, 2004.

<sup>18</sup> Goodyear, Charlie. “Sandbag giveaway for flood-prone areas.” *San Francisco Chronicle*, Nov. 19, 2004.

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