

Overloaded and Underfunded: Atlanta'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

In Your Backyard: Atlanta has serious clean water issues. For years, the city has been fined – more than \$20 million worth in the 1990s⁴ – for violating EPA water quality standards due to its failing sewer system. Atlanta's aging infrastructure is composed of combined systems that collect stormwater runoff and municipal wastewater in the same sewer line. Heavy rains often deluge the system and push out raw sewage into local waterways. The Upper Chattahoochee Riverkeeper was so concerned about elevated levels of bacteria in the region's rivers and streams that it sued the city in 1998. The environmental organization pursued the legal action to push the city to reduce sewer overflows.⁵

City officials have committed \$3.9 billion to split the combined systems into separate sanitary and stormwater lines and to replace old, leaky pipes.⁶ This agreement to



invest in infrastructure with state and federal officials ended the lawsuit against the city.⁷ It's no secret that the city has struggled to pay for this maintenance. Atlanta faces hundreds of million of dollars in bond debt for the cost of repairing its sewer system. Households across the region will pick up the tab for these necessary but expensive upgrades. Atlanta's water utility is seeking a 15 percent rate increase in 2008.⁸ Absent a much-needed increase in federal support, rate hikes will become a common occurrence for Atlanta residents.

EPA's most recent assessment of the Etowah, Middle Chattahoochee-Lake Harding, Upper Chattahoochee, Upper Flint and Upper Ocmulgee watersheds found 302 individual impairments to water quality, including fecal coliform bacteria, other pathogens and solid trash.⁹

Across Georgia: Statewide, EPA says that 58 percent of river miles and 25 percent of lakes suffer from impaired water quality, as do 11 percent of assessed estuaries.¹⁰



Additionally, a report by the Natural Resources Defense Council shows nationwide beach closings and swimming advisories were at an all-time high in 2006. Georgia experienced 203 closings and advisories lasting six weeks or fewer in 2006.¹¹

Yet while the needs are apparent, the funding to keep our water clean and safe is drying up. Partisan divisions in the annual congressional 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,¹² overall federal contributions to the State Revolving Fund have gone the other way. In Georgia, the state's clean water funding efforts have decreased by 47.8 percent since 1991 – nearly 66 percent when adjusted for inflation.¹³

Georgia's water needs dwarf its current ability to fund projects. The state's most recent Intended Use Plan lists nearly \$1.6 billion in wastewater infrastructure needs, more than 88 times the state's 2007 federal allotment of \$18.1 million.¹⁴ EPA's most recent Clean Watershed Needs survey determined that Georgia would require more than \$3.5 billion in infrastructure funding over the next 20 years.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 Georgia 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
- ² "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
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- ⁸ Copeland, Larry. "As Southeast drought eases, water bills rise." *USA Today*. April 22, 2008.
- ⁹ "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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- ¹¹ "Testing the Waters: A Guide to Water Quality at Vacation Beaches." Natural Resources Defense Council, Washington, D.C., August 2007.
- ¹² "Residential Service Charges Outpace Inflation for Sixth Straight Year." National Association of Clean Water Agencies, 2007.
- ¹³ "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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- 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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