

Overloaded and Underfunded: Southwestern Louisiana'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

“Virtually every sewerage agency in the country has serious problems,” he said. “It’s out of sight, out of mind and out of control.”

– Jay Schrock, national sewer consultant



In Your Backyard: In Lafayette, Louisiana, cracking pipes allow rainwater to enter the system, which can cause sewage to overflow into local waterways. The untreated sewage in streams and creeks violates federal clean water standards. As a result, EPA is requiring the Lafayette government to spend millions of dollars to upgrade its dilapidated sewer system and to stop polluting local waterways.⁴

The cash-strapped city has no choice but to have residents foot the bill. Thirty-eight thousand sewer customers experienced 10 percent sewer rate hikes in 2003 and 2004 to pay for upgrades to sewer plants.⁵ Rate increases continued in 2006, when Lafayette's rates rose by 12.5 percent to cover the \$10 million in necessary maintenance and repairs to the system over five years. Lafayette Utility Services director Mike Huvul acknowledged that residents will not like the rate increases but explained that “customers are going to be a lot more upset if...we start getting overflows of raw sewage.”⁶ Absent a much-needed increase federal funding, families in Lafayette will continue to bear the deluge of rate increases.

EPA's most recent assessment of the 10 watersheds in the region – the Vermilion, Mermentau, Bayou Teche, Mermentau Headwaters, Atchafalaya, Upper Calcasieu, Lower Calcasieu, West Fork Calcasieu, Lower Sabine, and Sabine Lake – found 71 unique impairments to water quality, including dissolved oxygen, bacteria, and suspended solids.⁷

Across Louisiana: According to a 2004 state analysis, 79 percent of Louisiana's river miles and 78 percent of its lakes are impaired. Additionally, 35 percent of the state's estuaries and bays do not adequately support aquatic life and six percent do not support swimming. Thirty percent of Louisiana's assessed wetlands do not fully support aquatic life.⁸

Unfortunately, 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.⁹ Louisiana lists \$263 million in clean water infrastructure needs on its most recent Clean Water State Revolving Fund Intended Use Plan, more than 22 times its 2007 federal allotment of \$11.8 million.¹⁰ EPA's most recent Clean Watershed Needs survey determined that Louisiana would need more than \$3.32 billion in infrastructure funding over the next 20 years.¹¹

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 Louisiana 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.

“I don't think it should be that high. They're not thinking about the little people who can't afford to pay for it, who are having enough trouble paying for medication and food.”

– Shirley Wiltz, Lafayette resident

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
- ³ “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
- ⁴ Taylor, Claire. “Possible increase.” *The Daily Advertiser*. Oct. 1, 2002.
- ⁵ Taylor, Claire. “Sewer fee hike to pay for plant upgrades.” *The Daily Advertiser*. Feb. 5, 2004.
- ⁶ Blanchard, Kevin. “Council raises service fees; LUS to raise water sewer rates; EPA upgrade requirements cited.” *The Advocate*. Sept. 22, 2006.
- ⁷ “Surf Your Watershed.” Office of Water, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Available at: <http://cfpub.epa.gov/surf/locate/index.cfm>
- ⁸ “2002 National Assessment Database.” U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Available at: www.epa.gov/waters/305b/index_2002.html
- ⁹ “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
- ¹⁰ “Clean Water State Revolving Loan Fund Intended Use Plan FY2008” Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality, June 2007.
- ¹¹ “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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