

Overloaded and Underfunded: Northeastern Minnesota'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

“We’ve got high gas, the highest utility rate in the five-state region and we are going to ask people to stomach more. It’s unfathomable to me.”

– Todd Fedora, Duluth city council member, on why he voted against the mayor’s proposed sewer charge¹⁸



In Your Backyard: Whether blizzard or rainstorm, sewage pours from Duluth sewers into Lake Superior. The last overflow was during heavy snow. In April 2008, an electrical outage allowed 35,000 gallons of wastewater to spill. Before that, in October 2007, heavy rains caused nearly 2 million gallons to gush onto city streets.⁴

These overflows are a common event for Duluth’s outdated wastewater system. More than 18 million gallons of untreated sewage spilled in 2007.⁵ Even though Duluth has separate stormwater and sewage lines, during heavy rains or snow melts, stormwater infiltrates the city’s cracked sewer pipes and can exceed the system’s capacity, causing overflows into Lake Superior.

By order of EPA, the city is undertaking a \$140 million plan to overhaul the system in an attempt to eliminate the overflows by 2016.⁶ It is replacing old pipes, building overflow basins and installing sump pumps to direct stormwater to the storm sewers. Although the federal government is requiring these improvements at the threat



of multimillion-dollar fines,⁷ it is not paying for them. Duluth residents are footing much of the bill through increased sewer rates.⁸

Duluth residents and businesses have some of the highest sewer rates in the country. In fact, they have the highest rates of any city in Minnesota and one of the highest in the five-state region, according to one engineering firm. Since 2001, the city has increased sewer rates by 59 percent, including a 10 percent hike approved in the fall of 2007. In the last 10 years, stormwater rates have jumped 73 percent.⁹

Mayor Don Ness recently proposed to add more onto household bills to pay for improvements and comply with EPA's mandate. He wanted to add a flat \$9.70 charge onto everyone's monthly wastewater bill and to require a number of households to repair their private sewer lines. His proposal, however, hasn't taken off. The city council, concerned about affordability, voted it down.¹⁰ Absent a much-needed increase in federal support, Duluth residents will bear the brunt of higher rates.

EPA's most recent assessment of the 27 watersheds in your community – the Baptism-Brule, Beartrap-Nemadji, Beaver-Lester, Big Fork, Clearwater-Elk, Cloquet, Crow Wing, Elk-Nokasippi, Kettle, Lake Superior, Leech Lake, Little Fork, Lower St. Croix, Mississippi Headwaters, Pine, Platte-Spunk, Prairie-Willow, Rainy Headwaters, Rainy Lake, Red Lakes, Rum, Sauk, Snake, St. Louis, Upper Rainy, Upper St. Croix and Vermilion – found 1,142 individual impairments to water quality, including fecal coliform bacteria and solid trash.¹¹

In Minnesota: Statewide, according to EPA's 2000 Water Quality Needs Survey assessments, 76 percent of the state's river miles and 36 percent of its lake waters were impaired.¹² Meanwhile, a report by the Natural Resources Defense Council shows nationwide beach closings and swimming advisories were at an all-time high in 2006. Minnesota experienced 73 closure or advisory events lasting six weeks or fewer in 2006.¹³

Yet while the needs are apparent, the funding to keep our water clean and safe is drying up. Partisan divisions in

“We try to be as sensitive as we possibly can [when we're preparing the budgets]. Believe me, we wouldn't ask for the rate increase if we didn't need the money.”

– Dave Prusak, Duluth's chief engineer of utilities²³

the annual 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,¹⁴ overall federal contributions to the State Revolving Fund have gone the other way. In Minnesota, the state's clean water funding efforts have decreased by 47.8 percent since 1991 – nearly 66 percent when adjusted for inflation.¹⁵

Minnesota's wastewater needs – 251 projects that will cost nearly \$1.8 billion to complete – are five and a half times its current funding capabilities, and more than 90 times its 2007 Clean Water State Revolving Fund federal allotment. If 12 projects submitted but not yet approved for its 2008 Intended Use Plan are accepted, the state's needs will increase by \$51 million.¹⁶ EPA's most recent Clean Watershed Needs survey determined that Minnesota would need more than \$2.72 billion in infrastructure funding over the next 20 years.¹⁷

Meanwhile, Minnesota's clean water infrastructure continues to deteriorate. Without increased funding, consumers will likely pay more in their sewer bills as communities struggle to meet their current and future needs. 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 and becomes 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 ideal answer would cover the entire nation, ensure steady, reliable funding to meet future needs, liberate the process from political interference, 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

“I’m committed to solving this issue and taking on our sacred responsibility of protecting Lake Superior and the St. Louis River. It is going to require some difficult decisions, and it’s certainly an issue I wish I didn’t have to deal with, but we really don’t have any choice.”

– Mayor Don Ness on his proposed charge to pay for sewer improvements to eliminate overflows²¹

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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