

# Overloaded and Underfunded: St Louis'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:** Muddy water oozes onto Wellington streets, sidewalks and storefronts after heavy rains.<sup>4</sup> While unpleasant, this is a common sight in St. Louis, whose outdated and dilapidated sewage system serves

*“It’s not clean mud, either. It reeks.”*

*– Pete Ressel, a machine shop owner in Wellston, on the wastewater that spills in front of his shop after rainstorms<sup>19</sup>*



about 1.4 million customers and covers the entire city and 90 percent of the county.<sup>5</sup>

In fact, EPA sued the St. Louis metropolitan sewer district last summer, claiming these spills violate the Clean Water Act and threaten public health. The lawsuit alleges that more than 500 million gallons of raw sewage poured into St. Louis waterways from the beginning of 2000 through the end of 2005.<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, the problem is massive. The district operates nearly 10,000 miles of piping, making it the fourth largest sewer system in the nation. The district has made great strides to improve its system, but it believes that many of the needed repairs are cost-prohibitive. It spent \$1.3 billion to reduce the number of overflows by 300, and it expects to spend another \$1 billion over the next five years to upgrade the system.<sup>7</sup> The grand total to comply with the EPA mandate could top \$4 billion.<sup>8</sup>



While recognizing the need to rejuvenate the system, district officials worry that the costly projects will drive sewer rates beyond people's budgets. Already, the district has increased sewer rates 60 percent in the last few years to cover upgrade costs, and it has proposed to raise them another 64 percent over the next five years.<sup>9</sup> The district's executive director has said that its customers can expect to see sewer bills quadruple to at least \$100 a month "in the not too distant future."<sup>10</sup>

Despite these rate hikes, the district says it simply does not have the money to rehabilitate the system and prevent sewage overflows.<sup>11</sup> Absent a much-needed increase in federal support, the city must make the difficult decision either to forgo system improvements and face EPA penalties or to further increase rates for households that may not be able to afford it.

EPA's most recent assessment of the Big, Cahokia-Joachim, Lower Missouri, Meramec, Upper Mississippi-Cape Girardeau, Upper St. Francis and Whitewater watersheds found 100 individual impairments to water quality, including fecal coliform bacteria, other pathogens and solid trash.<sup>12</sup>

**Across Missouri:** Statewide, EPA has determined that 48 percent of assessed river miles and 21 percent of lakes suffer from impaired water quality.<sup>13</sup>

Yet while the needs are apparent, the funding to keep our water clean and safe is drying up. Partisan divisions in 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,<sup>14</sup> overall federal contributions to the State Revolving Fund have gone the other way. In Missouri, the state's clean water funding efforts have decreased by 47.8 percent since 1991 – nearly 66 percent when adjusted for inflation.<sup>15</sup>

*“Atlanta and Boston have already seen \$100-a-month sewer bills. We can expect them here, too.”*

*– Jeff Theerman, executive director of the Metropolitan St. Louis Sewer District<sup>23</sup>*

According to the state's SRF administrators, Missouri currently faces costs of \$126.6 million in approved projects, \$40 million worth of projects on its contingency list and \$128 million worth in the planning stages. This \$330.6 million in needs should be contrasted with a federal appropriation of \$29.7 million in 2007.<sup>16</sup> EPA's most recent Clean Watershed Needs survey determined that Missouri would require more than \$4.84 billion in infrastructure funding over the next 20 years.<sup>17</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 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 best answer would cover Missouri 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](http://www.foodandwaterwatch.org/water/americaswater/clearwaters).

*“There does come a point where you start impacting severely the household budgets in our community, particularly the budgets of low-income and fixed-income individuals and families.”*

*– Lance LeComb, spokesperson for the St. Louis Metropolitan Sewer District<sup>21</sup>*

#### Endnotes

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- <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> Hathaway, Matthew. “Muck in the streets MSD says Wellston is responsible for cleanup, adds that a fix is a ways off,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, March 24, 2008.
- <sup>5</sup> Walter, Donna. “Environmentalists ask to join suit against Metropolitan St. Louis Sewer District.” *St. Charles Business Record*, Aug. 15, 2007.
- <sup>6</sup> McGuire, Kim. “State is liable, MSD argues in court case,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, Sept. 25, 2007.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>8</sup> Hampel, Paul. “\$100-a-month sewer bills are on the horizon, MSD official says.” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, June 4, 2008.
- <sup>9</sup> Walter, Donna, op. cit.
- <sup>10</sup> Hampel, Paul, op. cit.
- <sup>11</sup> Retka, Allison. “St. Louis sewer district defends itself, sues state.” *St. Louis Daily Record*, Sept. 24, 2007.
- <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> “Residential Service Charges Outpace Inflation for Sixth Straight Year.” National Association of Clean Water Agencies, 2007.
- <sup>15</sup> “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](http://www.epa.gov/owm/cwfinance/cwsrf/cwsrfallots.pdf)
- <sup>16</sup> “Missouri State Fiscal Year 2008 Clean Water State Revolving Fund Intended Use Plan, State Grant and Loan Priority List and Program Application Forms & Instructions.” Missouri Department of Natural Resources, May 16, 2007.
- <sup>17</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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- <sup>19</sup> Hathaway, Matthew. “Muck in the streets MSD says Wellston is responsible for cleanup, adds that a fix is a ways off,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, March 24, 2008.
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