

Overloaded and Underfunded: Northwest Pennsylvania'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: Communities all over Northwestern Pennsylvania are in clean water trouble. Dur-

“It is time for townships, such as Millcreek, to take responsibility for inadequate systems and sewer overflows.”

– Jennifer Murphy, Mid-Atlantic Environmental Law Center



ing rainstorms, higher-than-capacity volumes of water overwhelm treatment plants, pushing raw, untreated sewage into the state's more than 86,000 miles of rivers and streams. The problem is particularly severe for older combined sewers, which mix rainwater runoff with municipal wastewater and commonly overflow during rainstorms. Pennsylvania has more combined sewer overflows than any other state in the country.⁴

In addition, Northwest Pennsylvania has an acute problem with its “Wildcat” sewer systems, which collect wastewater but have no treatment facilities. The raw sewage from these systems empties into streams and abandoned mines. Officials suspect that these Wildcat sewers could have contributed to the 44 days of Lake Erie beach closings on Presque Isle in 2005 and 2006.⁵

The city of Erie provides a model for other communities to use in improving their sewer infrastructure. In 1996, EPA fined the city and its sewer authority \$1 million for



violating the Clean Water Act. A year later, Erie broke ground on an ambitious four-year project to upgrade its sewer infrastructure, parts of which were nearly 100 years old. Upon successful completion in 2001, Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection Secretary David Hess noted, “Erie has developed an environmentally sound, coherent system for dealing with its wastes and sets the standard for cities in Pennsylvania and across the country to emulate.” The improvement project’s price tag of \$100 million has resulted in residents paying what former Mayor Joyce Savocchio admitted to being “substantially higher sewer bills.”⁶

EPA’s most recent assessment of the 13 watersheds in the region— the Connoquenessing, Lower Allegheny, Middle Allegheny-Redbank, Middle Allegheny-Tionesta, Clarion, Shenango, French, Kiskiminetas, Conewango, Upper Allegheny, Chautauqu-Conneaut, Ashtabula-Chagrin and Lake Erie – found 972 unique impairments to water quality, including metals, suspended solids and Polychlorinated Biphenyls.⁷

Across Pennsylvania: According to the state’s 2004 analysis, 20 percent of assessed river miles and 32 percent of assessed Pennsylvanian lakes suffer from impaired water quality.⁸

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,⁹ overall federal contributions to the State Revolving Fund have gone the other way. In Pennsylvania, 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.¹⁰

“Even in light rainfalls raw and inadequately treated sewage is discharged. By allowing this to continue we compromise the health of our place and our people. It’s an embarrassment to the region.”

– Cathy Pedler, Coordinator for Gaia Defense League

Pennsylvania’s current Clean Water State Revolving Fund Intended Use Plan shows the state has a need for \$198 million in wastewater infrastructure spending, while the American Society of Civil Engineers’ 2005 Report Card says the state will require \$8.06 billion in future efforts.¹¹ EPA’s most recent Clean Watershed Needs survey determined that Pennsylvania would need more than \$7.17 billion in infrastructure funding over the next 20 years.¹²

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 Pennsylvania 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.

“Malfunctioning sewage systems are one of the leading causes of waterborne illnesses in Pennsylvania. Helping municipalities manage our water resources effectively is imperative to providing safe, clean and reliable water supplies, which are critical to improving the quality of life in Pennsylvania and growing our economy.”

*– Pennsylvania Governor
Ed Rendell*

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

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⁴ Stevens, Kathy. “Five York County facilities listed among Pennsylvania polluters.” *The York Dispatch* (York, PA). March 27, 2006.

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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 “Residential Service Charges Outpace Inflation for Sixth Straight Year.” National Association of Clean Water Agencies, 2007.

¹⁰ “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

¹¹ “Clean Water State Revolving Fund and Intended Use Plan FY 2007.” Pennsylvania Infrastructure Investment Authority and Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection, October 2007. Available at: www.depweb.state.pa.us/watersupply/lib/watersupply/RevolvFd_CW_IUP2007.pdf

¹² “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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