

# Overloaded and Underfunded: Mississippi-Gulf Coast'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 clean 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:** Communities all over southeastern Mississippi are in serious clean water trouble. Decay-

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

*– Jay Schrock, National Sewer Consultant*



ing sewer lines and overwhelmed treatment plants can no longer handle the region's wastewater output. The problem is especially acute during major storms and hurricanes, as rainwater surges into sewer lines and quickly pushes the clean water infrastructure beyond its capacity. During Tropical Storm Allison, heavy rainfall caused sewage lift stations in Harrison County to fail, resulting in 37 sewage spills.<sup>4</sup>

During these major storms, overflows of raw sewage release hazardous contaminants into the water supply, posing risks to human health. In a petition calling for the relocation of a sewage treatment plant from the Pascoagoula Riverfront to a more flood-resistant area, Dr. Steven L. Demetropoulos said that “untreated raw sewage released into homes or businesses during a hurricane, flood or other disaster could result in residents suffering from such serious illnesses as salmonella, hepatitis and others, including forms of flesh-eating bacteria.”<sup>5</sup> In addition, sewage carries nutrients that encourage the



Photo by Flickr user Neepster.

growth of bacteria that harm aquatic life in rivers, lakes and along the Gulf Coast.<sup>6</sup>

EPA's most recent assessment of the 13 watersheds in the region – the Chunky-Okatibbee, Middle-Tombigbee Chickasaw, Sucarnoochee, Upper Chickasawhay, Lower Chickasawhay, Lower Leaf, Escatawpa, Black, Upper Leaf, Pascoagoula, Mississippi Coastal, Lower Pearl, and Middle Pearl-Silver – found 172 unique impairments to water quality, including fecal coliform bacteria, pesticides and hydrocarbons.<sup>7</sup>

**Across Mississippi:** According to EPA's most recently released assessment, 77 percent of the state's river miles and 12 percent of lake suffer from impaired water quality. Additionally, 10 percent of estuaries and bays do not fully support aquatic life. Eighteen percent of the state's ocean shorelines are unsafe for swimming.<sup>8</sup>

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.<sup>9</sup> Mississippi's Clean Water State Revolving Fund Intended Use Plan shows the state's current wastewater infrastructure need at \$116.4 million. Mississippi's 2007 federal allotment amounted to \$9.6 million.<sup>10</sup> EPA's most recent Clean Watershed Needs survey determined that Mississippi would require more than \$993 million in infrastructure funding over the next 20 years.<sup>11</sup>

*“You cannot open your windows. You can taste it in your mouth – that taste, you can't get it out.”*

*– Becky Jones, a Pass Christian resident who sued her neighbor for causing excessive sewage problems*

Meanwhile, Mississippi'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 best answer would cover Mississippi 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).

*“Sewage spills and overflows during storms are routine on the (Gulf) Coast and elsewhere. But just because they’re routine doesn’t mean they aren’t serious. You can’t trivialize it.”*

*– Jay Grimes, Dean of the Institute of Marine Sciences*

#### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> “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](http://www.epa.gov/safewater/gapreport.pdf)

<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> “Sewage causes an overflow of problems on Gulf Coast.” The Associated Press State & Local Wire. June 21, 2001.

<sup>5</sup> Baker, Margaret. “Sewage-plant move sought.” *The Sun Herald* (Biloxi, Mississippi). November 21, 2007.

<sup>6</sup> “Sewage causes an overflow of problems on Gulf Coast.” The Associated Press State & Local Wire. June 21, 2001.

<sup>7</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>8</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>9</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>10</sup> “Water Pollution Control (Clean Water) Revolving Loan Fund Program Final FY-2007 Intended Use Plan.” Commission on Environmental Quality, Office of Pollution Control, Mississippi Department of Environmental Quality, Jan. 25, 2007. Available at: [www.deq.state.ms.us/mdeq.nsf/pdf/SRF\\_FinalFY08CWIUP/\\$File/Final FY 07 CW IUP.pdf?OpenElement](http://www.deq.state.ms.us/mdeq.nsf/pdf/SRF_FinalFY08CWIUP/$File/Final%20FY%2007%20CW%20IUP.pdf?OpenElement)

<sup>11</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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