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NRDC, WASTEWATER UTILITIES JOIN FORCES ON NATIONAL PLAN TO KEEP SEWAGE OUT OF OUR WATERS

Groups Offer Alternative to Bad Policy Blocked by Congress; Ball Now in EPA's Court

WASHINGTON (October 27, 2005) -- After months of negotiations, a top U.S. environmental group and a national wastewater utility trade association today announced a plan to protect the public from exposure to inadequately treated sewage. (For a copy of the plan, click [here](#).)

The Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) and the National Association of Clean Water Agencies (NACWA) drafted the plan as an alternative to an Environmental Protection Agency proposal that would have allowed wastewater facilities to discharge inadequately treated sewage into waterways virtually anytime it rains.

Last April, EPA -- in response to the heated controversy sparked by its proposal -- encouraged NRDC and NACWA to work together to solve the problem. A month later, EPA withdrew the proposal just hours before Congress prohibited the agency from finalizing it, setting the stage for the two groups to devise a better approach.

"We put our heads together and came up with a workable plan that will protect public health," said Nancy Stoner, director of NRDC's Clean Water Project. "Now the EPA should endorse it and put it in place."

Withdrawn EPA Proposal Would Have Exacerbated Sewage Problem

The agency's so-called "blending" proposal, would have let sewer operators routinely mix inadequately treated sewage with fully treated sewage before discharging it downstream, allowing facilities to bypass the crucial "secondary treatment" step that removes most of the viruses, parasites and other pathogens, as well as toxic chemicals, from sewage.

The Clean Water Act allows facilities to release partially treated sewage only during extreme weather events when it is not possible for a system to fully treat the entire flow, but EPA's proposal would have allowed sewage dumping virtually whenever it rains, even if full treatment were feasible. EPA's proposal only would have required primary treatment, which merely screens out solids from sewage.

Health experts estimate that there are 7.1 million mild-to-moderate cases and 560,000 moderate-to-severe cases of infectious waterborne disease in the United States annually. Many of these cases are caused by exposure to sewage.

Untreated sewage contains a variety of dangerous pathogens, including bacteria (such as *E coli*), viruses (such as hepatitis A), protozoa (such as *Cryptosporidium* and *Giardia*) and helminth worms. The pathogens in sewage can cause illnesses ranging from diarrhea and vomiting and respiratory infections to hepatitis and dysentery. Small children, the elderly, cancer patients, and others with impaired immune systems are the most likely to get sick.

Besides the obvious health threat, EPA's original proposal would have serious long-term environmental and economic consequences, said Stoner. More sewage in our waterways would close beaches, kill fish and destroy shellfish beds. Sewage is the second largest known cause of U.S. beach closures and advisories every year.

New Plan Would Better Protect Public Health

The plan that NRDC and NACWA negotiated would require wastewater facilities to upgrade and repair their leaky sewage systems to protect public health. It would require facilities to fully treat sewage unless EPA and a state environmental agency determine there is no feasible way to do so. It also will require facilities to notify the public and environmental agencies every time they discharge inadequately treated sewage.

"The public must be warned when treatment facilities dump sewage into their local waterways," said Stoner. "This plan will make sure that happens."

The plan also would require EPA to take enforcement actions, including levying fines and penalties, against sewer authorities that fail to fix their leaky systems or upgrades their facilities.

The Natural Resources Defense Council is a national, nonprofit organization of scientists, lawyers and environmental specialists dedicated to protecting public health and the environment. Founded in 1970, NRDC has more than 1 million members and online activists nationwide, served from offices in New York, Washington, Los Angeles and San Francisco.

Related Press Materials

[NRDC and National Association of Clean Water Agencies Plan](#) (328 k pdf)

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