



EPA DRAFT SEWAGE DUMPING POLICY (May 2005)

What is the draft sewage dumping policy?

EPA's draft policy relaxes restrictions on discharging inadequately treated sewage into waterways during rain events. It would allow sewage treatment plants to discharge sewage that has been diverted around secondary treatment units during wet weather. Because the largely untreated sewage is mixed with treated sewage before discharge, EPA refers to this as "sewage blending." Specifically, it permits the discharge of sewage that has had no biological treatment to kill pathogens and remove other pollutants.

Who supports it and why is it being proposed?

Sewer authorities have convinced the Bush administration that the answer to insufficient maintenance of aging sewer systems is to allow sewage to be discharged without effective treatment during rainfall when it can be diluted. They claim that weakening current sewage treatment requirements will resolve "inconsistencies in regional enforcement" and avoid the cost of upgrading treatment facilities.

Why is this a bad idea?

Sewage dumping is bad for public health. Sewage is filled with human wastes, industrial chemical waste, and commercial wastes containing grease, toxins, bacteria, viruses, parasites, intestinal worms, pharmaceuticals, hormones and antibiotics. "Blended" sewage has significantly higher levels of these pollutants than sewage that has undergone full treatment. Sewage that has not been fully treated is filled with bacteria, viruses, and parasites that carry diseases, such as cholera, hepatitis, gastroenteritis, respiratory infections, and dysentery. These illnesses can be life threatening for small children, the elderly, cancer patients, and others who are already weakened by disease. Experts estimate that 8 million Americans get sick every year from polluted water.

Sewage dumping is bad for the economy and the environment. Allowing polluters to discharge inadequately treated sewage into our nation's waters will have adverse, long-term environmental consequences. Sewage in our waterways closes beaches, increases the cost of drinking water filtration, feeds toxic algal blooms, damages coral reefs, shuts down shellfish beds, and robs the water of oxygen that fish need to breathe.

EPA's sewage dumping policy is illegal. The Clean Water Act and its implementing regulations require sewage to be fully treated prior to discharge under routine operating conditions. EPA's proposed sewage dumping policy sewage does not meet current treatment requirements, and EPA has taken several enforcement actions against sewer operators in which EPA has clearly stated that sewage dumping violates the CWA.

Because EPA’s sewage dumping policy would increase sewage pollution and threaten public health, the proposed guidance has provoked a firestorm of protest. Among those weighing in against the proposal are state agencies in Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Washington, as well as the International Association of Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Mayors, the American Public Health Association, the Pacific and East Coast Shellfish Growers Associations, the National Fisheries Institute, and the Children’s Environmental Health Network.

Sewage Questions and Answers

Q. Are you saying EPA’s policy will allow more *raw* sewage to be dumped into the water?

A. No, the policy would allow facilities to dump *inadequately treated* sewage. It wouldn’t be “raw” because it will have received primary treatment, which means that the larger “solids” have been screened out, but that’s it. Most of the viruses, parasites and other pollutants are removed during “secondary treatment,” -- which is what EPA’s policy would allow treatment operators to routinely skip.

Q. Are you saying that sewage treatment operators should *never* be able to blend, and that communities should have to build enormous treatment plants that cost tens of billions of dollars in order to treat every drop of sewage, which is impossible anyway?

A. No. The current rules already allow blending to occur, but it is only to be used as a *last resort* in the event of a major storm when alternative treatment measures are not feasible. We support maintaining the current safeguards. EPA’s proposed policy would allow treatment plants to *routinely* bypass full treatment, even when alternative treatment measures are feasible. It is one thing to say that we can’t possibly treat every single drop of sewage, and another to say that virtually every time it rains sewage treatment plants can discharge sewage that has been screened but not treated.

Q. EPA and the sewage treatment operators say that the blended sewage will still be required to meet all Clean Water Act standards. Isn’t that good enough to protect public health?

A. No. Under EPA’s policy, the “blended” sewage that is being dumped will meet end of the pipe standards via massive dilution, not actual treatment of the sewage. The “blended” effluent will contain more of what makes people sick and hurts the environment: viruses, parasites, nutrients, toxic chemicals, etc. The bottom line is, even if it is sufficiently diluted to meet standards, the final effluent will have more sewage in it.

Q. The sewage treatment plants I am familiar with disinfects sewage after it has received primary treatment, isn’t that good enough to resolve any health concerns?

A. No. In the first place, EPA’s policy does not *require* facilities to disinfect their “blended” effluent before discharge, and, although some systems do so, many do not. In addition, disinfection is less effective on blended effluent because, basically, the cloudier the effluent, the less effective disinfection is. Blended effluent is cloudier, and therefore, disinfection is not nearly as effective in killing pathogens in the sewage.