Combating sewage pollution in Lake Michigan

It’s time for the EPA to act to cut sewage pollution

Summertime wouldn’t be complete without a trip to the beach, whether it’s a weekend trip up north or a walk down by the lakefront in Chicago. Unfortunately, in recent years, beach closings have been nearly as common along the Illinois shoreline as hot dogs and volleyball nets.

The people who rely on Lake Michigan for their drinking water and summertime recreation, as well as the wildlife who call it home, are threatened by the millions of gallons of sewage pollution that pour into it every year. This summer, we’re calling on the Environmental Protection Agency to update its standards to curb the pollution that causes sewage overflows and makes our beaches unswimmable.

When it rains, sewage pours

When rainwater flows over paved surfaces such as driveways, sidewalks, rooftops, highways and parking lots, the water collects pollutants such as petroleum, heavy metals, animal waste and chemicals—and transports them directly into our rivers, streams and larger waters such as Lake Michigan.

Stormwater is a leading source of water pollution nationwide. And what’s more, heavy rains can overwhelm cities’ sewage systems, causing raw sewage to flow into waterways without ever being treated.

In this manner, millions of gallons of sewage make their way into Lake Michigan every year. During the summer, beaches up and down our state’s 60 miles of shoreline are flagged for bacteria levels above state standards, and swimmers are told to stay away. Elevated bacteria levels have prompted more than 500 beach closings on Illinois’s shores every year since 2005.

Stopping sewage pollution

The EPA is now working to update its rules to cut sewage pollution, but polluters and their allies in Congress are trying to prevent the EPA from doing its job.

That’s why we’re working to build public support for stronger stormwater rules. Over the summer, we’ll work to win news coverage of the issue, build a coalition of supporters, and collect petition signatures from tens of thousands of Illinoisans—all to show EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson that Illinoisans want the agency to protect Lake Michigan.

Bacteria causes more than 500 days of beach closings in Illinois each year.

take action

Stormwater on paved surfaces causes sewage overflows into Lake Michigan. We’re calling on EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson to create strong rules to cut sewage pollution. To show your support, visit our website and sign the petition.

www.EnvironmentIllinois.org/action
To our members

For millions of Illinoisans, summer means spending time on the water, whether it’s spending the afternoon at Oak Street Beach, where I like to swim, or taking a weekend trip to one of the other Great Lakes.

All of these waterways are cleaner today than they once were, thanks in large part to the Clean Water Act and other rules set by state and federal environmental officials—some of which we’ve helped win. Unfortunately, too many of our waterways are still not clean enough—runoff from factory farms causes fish kills in our rivers, and hundreds of our beaches end up closed because pollution makes them unsafe for swimming.

As we work to clean up our waters, polluters are filing lawsuits and pushing some in Congress to block the EPA from doing its job. I hope you’ll join us this summer in showing your support for clean water.

Sincerely,

Max Muller
Program Director

Report: Illinois’s growing energy efficiency industry

Energy efficiency—doing more with less energy—is the cleanest, cheapest and smartest “source” of energy. Our new report, “Saving Energy, Growing Jobs,” details ways that the efficiency industry creates jobs across Illinois’s entire economy.

Our report tallied businesses related to energy efficiency—from energy auditors and energy-efficient homebuilders, to weatherization contractors and manufacturers of energy-efficient products—and found at least 330 Illinois businesses and 737 retail outlets working on energy efficiency.

Illinois’s energy efficiency businesses create jobs while cutting global warming pollution and fossil fuel dependence. They’ve been boosted by recent state policies we’ve helped win, as well as the federal economic recovery package. But many opportunities to save fuel and save money will be missed unless Illinois continues to strengthen its energy efficiency policies and programs—as of this writing, we’re hard at work on bills in the Legislature to do just that.

Is nuclear power worth the risk?

Our hearts go out to the people of Japan who, after seeing a massive earthquake and tsunami strike their country, were forced to contend with an escalating nuclear crisis.

At press time, the consequences were still unfolding: Drinking water samples in Tokyo were contaminated with radioactive iodine at a level dangerous to infants; hundreds of thousands of people were evacuated from the area around the reactors; and high radiation levels were found in nearby ocean waters.

Environment Illinois is urging the Obama administration and others to improve the safety of existing nuclear plants, declare a moratorium on new plants, and begin to responsibly phase out our use of nuclear power in favor of clean, renewable energy, like wind and solar power.
There's no doubt that the Clean Air Act, which turned 40 in 2010, has improved the health and well-being of millions of Americans. Its protections are credited with saving the lives of 160,000 Americans in 2010 alone.

Of course, air pollution remains a pressing health threat in this country, a stark reminder of the work still left to do. In 2010, 13,200 Americans lost their lives as a result of heart attacks, strokes, asthma attacks and other fatal conditions brought on or exacerbated by air pollution from power plants. It's estimated that one in six women of childbearing age has enough mercury in her bloodstream (a byproduct of coal power production) to put her child at risk should she become pregnant.

Thankfully, the Obama administration has announced it will seek to strengthen and update portions of the Clean Air Act in the coming months.

An assault on our health
With some vocal opponents of the Clean Air Act throwing their weight around in Congress, Environment Illinois, along with our national federation, Environment America, the Respiratory Health Association of Metropolitan Chicago and other public health organizations are building support to make sure the administration’s proposals go through.

In January, Environment Illinois Field Associate Miranda Carter released a hard-hitting examination of one of the most dangerous air pollutants: mercury. That report, “Dirty Energy’s Assault on our Health,” documented waterways that carry advisories warning against fish consumption due to mercury pollution, including the Great Lakes.

A taste of things to come?
The Obama administration’s updates to the Clean Air Act face great uncertainty, with polluting industries and their allies in Congress launching an all-out assault on the landmark environmental law.

In February, the House of Representatives attached a provision to a federal funding bill that would have blocked the Environmental Protection Agency from cutting mercury pollution from cement plants, cleaning up soot pollution, and reducing carbon dioxide from coal-fired power plants.

Less than a month later, the Senate rejected the funding bill, with many senators citing the environmental and public health attacks within the bill as one of the reasons for their opposition. In April, the Senate rejected another attempt by polluters’ allies to hamstring the EPA—this time to stop the EPA from regulating greenhouse gas emissions. Sen. Dick Durbin voted against the attack on the EPA; Sen. Mark Kirk sided with polluters.

With some members of Congress still trying to block the EPA from doing its job in protecting our air, Environment Illinois is continuing to work for clean air and a healthier future.

Members in action
When it’s time to show our elected officials strong public support for the environment, thousands of Environment Illinois members spring into action—signing petitions, making phone calls, and even joining us in Springfield to lobby our leaders in person. We’re proud to profile a couple of members who have had a big impact on our work this year:

Dave Segel
In his five years of service on Environment Illinois’s Board of Directors, Dave has lent a hand on a variety of issues, from solar power to parks funding. This spring, he led the way in generating citizen phone calls urging Sen. Mark Kirk to support the Clean Air Act. He also attended our Environmental Lobby Day in Springfield—where, along with 125 volunteers from across the state, he lobbied state legislators to:

• Jump-start solar energy in Illinois and prioritize energy efficiency;
• Keep our drinking water safe from fracking, or hydraulic fracturing, a dangerous natural gas extraction technique; and
• Protect our state parks by averting cuts to Illinois Department of Natural Resources funding.

Brandon Leavitt
Brandon (shown above at a recent press conference) is a member of Environment Illinois. Professionally, he serves as the Director of Solar Services Inc., a local company that designs and install solar heat, hot water, and electric systems. He has been a regular spokesperson to the media on the benefits of Illinois’s growing clean energy industry.

Sign up to be an activist at: www.EnvironmentIllinois.org.
A new Environment Illinois report finds that America’s biggest agribusiness interests remain one of our largest roadblocks in the fight for clean water—not only because of the staggering scale and under-regulation of factory farm pollution, but also due to the depth of their wallets.

The report, “Growing Influence: The Political Power of Agribusiness and the Fouling of America’s Waterways,” analyzed campaign contributions and lobbying expenditures from agribusiness interests. It found, for example, that America’s 10 largest agribusiness interests, such as the American Farm Bureau, gave $35 million to candidates for Congress over the past decade. Big Ag gave $360,000 in contributions just to Illinois’s 2010 gubernatorial candidates. Through case studies, the report documents how these companies are using their store-bought clout to oppose clean water protections.

“Giant agricultural companies are throwing around millions of dollars to fight to continue polluting our rivers, lakes and streams,” said Regional Field Organizer Lauren Monahan.

Monsanto, Cargill and Land O’Lakes are among the big agribusiness interests that blocked a 2010 effort to restore Clean Water Act protections to all of America’s waterways, including more than half of Illinois’s streams and 150,000 acres of our wetlands. Read the full report at www.EnvironmentIllinois.org.