



About the Sewage Overflow Issue



Q: What is a sewage overflow?

A: During nearly every rainfall or snow melt, excess water gets into the municipal sewer systems, which results in untreated sewage overflowing into area streams and rivers. These overflows violate the Environmental Protection Agency's federal Clean Water Act.

Q: What is the Clean Water Act and how does it affect our region?

A: The Clean Water Act was enacted in 1977 and prohibits any person or entity from discharging pollutants, such as sewage, from a point source into waterways unless a permit is obtained. Under this Act, communities in the ALCOSAN service area must eliminate all overflows from separate sanitary sewer systems and significantly reduce overflows from combined sewer systems.

Q: What is the difference between a separate sanitary sewer system and a combined sewer system?

A: A separate sanitary sewer system is designed to carry only wastewater to the treatment plant. Stormwater is carried in a separate system, and is not transported to the treatment plant.

In a combined sewer system, both wastewater and stormwater are carried in the same pipes. Of the 83 communities in the ALCOSAN service area, 26 have been identified as having primarily a combined sewer system within their municipal boundaries. The remaining 57 communities have separate sanitary sewage collection systems.

Q: How bad is the sewage overflow problem in the region?

A: Each year, these overflows affect Pittsburgh's rivers at least 70 days during the boating season (May 15- October 1) making water unacceptable for recreational contact. In addition, the overflows affect Allegheny County's primary source of drinking water. (Nearly 90 percent of Allegheny County residents get their drinking water from Pittsburgh's rivers.) Municipalities in the ALCOSAN service area could face a potential \$2 billion investment in order to correct the problem. However, the best way to trim this \$2 billion investment cost is for municipalities to work together on a long-term solution. Local municipal officials must take a serious look at the cost of maintaining ownership of this aged and deteriorating infrastructure. One solution might be to transfer ownership and operation of a municipality's collection system to a larger entity.

Q: How does the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) plan to enforce the Clean Water Act?

A: The EPA recently distributed a draft administrative consent orders to municipal officials in all 83 ALCOSAN communities outlining the activities, such as cleaning and televising the sewers that municipalities must accomplish over several years (2004-2010) to begin complying with the Clean Water Act. For communities with separate sanitary sewer systems, the Allegheny County Health Department (ACHD) will enforce compliance with the order and in combined sewer communities, the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) will be the enforcement agent on behalf of the EPA.

Q: What is an administrative consent order?

A: This EPA administrative consent order is a legal document that is signed by both the community and an enforcement agency that binds the community to complete specific activities that will lead to the elimination or reduction of sewage overflows in their municipal collection system. If the community does not meet the requirements of the order, the enforcement agency will impose penalties and/or fines.

Q: What does the administrative consent order require?

A: The administrative consent order requires communities to address the sewage overflow issue through specific activities, such as mapping, cleaning and televising the sewer system and making critical repairs. Then communities must complete flow monitoring, which indicates how much wastewater (and in some cases, stormwater) the sewage system is carrying during both dry and wet weather. This information will help communities develop a long-term wet weather control plan, in cooperation with ALCOSAN to sustain rehabilitation efforts into the future.

Q: How will communities financially accomplish the tasks required?

A: Fixing the sewage overflow problem in the region's municipal collection system could cost up to \$2 billion for ALCOSAN communities. However, through the 3 Rivers Wet Weather Basin Groups, municipalities are exploring ways to share resources and costs to fix the problem using fewer dollars. In addition, 3RWWDP receives some federal, state and local funding to help support the communities. Communities are encouraged to begin budgeting for activities over several years to help lessen the impact on their municipality's annual budget.

Q: What is my role as a homeowner?

A: It is important to become educated on the sewage overflow issue because every individual can play a role in helping to solve the problem. As a homeowner, you are responsible for the maintenance and repair of your house lateral, a pipe that connects your home to the public sewer system. A cracked or deteriorated lateral or one filled with tree roots can allow groundwater to seep into the system contributing to the problem. In addition, if your community has a separate sanitary sewer system, you may be required to fix any improper connections, such as downspouts, driveway drains or sump pumps connected directly to the sewer system. The stormwater collected from these devices must be drained to your property or directly connected to a separate stormwater system.

Q: Will sewage rates go up?

A: Yes, it is likely that nearly all communities in the ALCOSAN service area will raise their sewage rates at some point to help pay for the cost of correcting the sewage overflow problem. Historically, the region's sewage rates have been among the lowest in the country. In addition, communities working through the 3 Rivers Wet Weather Basin Groups will be able to minimize their sewage rate increases by participating in the Basin Groups' cooperative projects.

Q: What role will 3 Rivers Wet Weather play in helping communities comply with the orders?

A: 3 Rivers Wet Weather has taken a lead role in helping communities tackle this problem through a basin-wide approach. The organization helped to facilitate the communication between the municipalities and the regulatory agencies which led to a feasible consent order signed by 100% of the communities in early 2004. In addition, 3RWW has funded and coordinated a system-wide mapping project to locate and map more than 100,000 manholes and structures throughout the system. 3RWW also plans to coordinate the flow monitoring requirements of the order across the ALCOSAN service area to help build the foundation for regional approaches in the future.

Q: Are other regions of the United States struggling with the same problems?

A: Yes, primarily older cities in the northeastern United States are struggling with the sewage overflow issue because they, too, have old and deteriorated sewer systems. However, Allegheny County is unique because it is the only location in the country in which 83 municipalities own and operate their own sewage collection system, and all of these systems feed into one sewage treatment facility (ALCOSAN).

