7. POLICY POSITION

INCLUSION OF CORRECTING THE PROBLEM OF COMBINED SEWER OVERFLOW (CSO) IN REAUTHORIZATION OF THE CLEAN WATER ACT

Background

When the first sewer systems were built at the turn of the century, surface waters were the final disposition point for both sanitary waste and stormwater. During the succeeding decades most cities with combined sewer systems built interceptors to carry the flow away from their community and into nearby surface waters. At that time, it was believed that the receiving streams would be able to assimilate this wastewater discharge. When it became evident that this was not the case, communities began to build plants to treat the sanitary wastewater during dry weather. As wastewater plants have developed effective, proven treatment technologies, attention began to focus on the control of combined sewer overflows (CSO) that occur during wet weather.

Combined sewer overflows are flows from a combined sewer in excess of the interceptor or regulator capacity of a publicly owned treatment facility. When there is dry weather, all the sewage generally can be conveyed to the treatment plant. However, when it rains, the flow to the treatment plant results in some of the mixed flow being untreated and discharged into a stream or river. This discharge contains human bacteria, sanitary sewage, possible toxic runoff, street debris and material which could have adverse effects on water quality, aesthetics, and public health.

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) estimates that there are approximately 1,200 combined sewer systems which serve a population of 43,000,000. These systems contain between 15,000 and 20,000 discharge points. Most major municipal areas are served by a combination of sanitary sewers, separate storm sewers, or combined sanitary and storm sewers which were developed, to a large extent, prior to World War II. The estimated costs of upgrading the 320 CSO systems which have developed plans is $16.4 billion; the total estimated cost to correct the entire 1,200 systems ranges between $50 billion and $100 billion nationally.

The magnitude of the potential costs associated with CSO controls represents a serious financial burden, not only to individual localities but to state government as well.

Recommendation

The Southern Legislative Conference urges Congress to fund wastewater treatment in the reauthorization of the Clean Water Act. Further, the Southern Legislative Conference requests EPA to expand its funding for water pollution control beyond wastewater and provide the financial assistance necessary to correct the problem of combined sewer overflow.

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(Sponsor: Delegate A. Victor Thomas, Virginia)

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