

Midwest Environmental ADVOCATES

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Environmental Groups Call on EPA to Set Tighter Standards for Wastewater Treatment Plants

Washington, DC – Earlier this week, a consortium of ten environmental groups, including Midwest Environmental Advocates, submitted a petition to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (“EPA”), requesting stricter standards for discharges of wastewater from municipal wastewater treatment facilities. The EPA establishes categorical limits for pollutants discharged from these treatment plants into our nation’s waters, and has a duty to update these limits as treatment technology improves.

“The EPA must set national standards to restrict phosphorus and nitrogen pollution from one of the most common sources, wastewater treatment plants,” said Betsy Lawton, staff attorney for Midwest Environmental Advocates. “In the past, the EPA has refused to set nation-wide standards for phosphorus and nitrogen, claiming that a treatment plant can control its pollution output to protect local waterways, yet these pollutants cause severe water quality problems. In Wisconsin, we have become all too familiar with nuisance and toxic algae, and the smelly, green ‘pea soup’ appearance of affected waters. This mess causes problems in the downstream Mississippi River and the Gulf of Mexico. It is not merely a local problem.” At this time, neither states nor the EPA have established numeric limits for phosphorus or nitrogen.

The petition stresses the need for phosphorus and nitrogen limits, and asks the EPA, after 20 years of inaction, to review and update all pollution limits for wastewater treatment plants. “There are many technologies available today that will allow treatment plants to discharge cleaner water,” added Ms. Lawton. “These technologies can be incorporated into existing plants and are cost-effective. The EPA should base categorical limits on the best technologies out there, not on what was available twenty years ago.”

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FAST FACTS

- The environmental groups filing the petition were: Natural Resources Defense Council, Environmental Law and Policy Center of the Midwest, Sierra Club, Waterkeeper Alliance, Missouri Coalition for the Environment, Midwest Environmental Advocates, Prairie Rivers Network, Iowa Environmental Council, Minnesota Center for Environmental Advocacy, American Rivers and the Gulf Restoration Network
- Excessive amounts of nitrogen and phosphorus can cause damage to aquatic life as well as harm the aesthetic quality of waters. Adverse ecological effects of nutrients include harmful algal blooms (such as blue-green algae), reduced dissolved oxygen in the water, and decreased water clarity (increased turbidity).
- Severe reductions in dissolved oxygen result in hypoxic zones, often referred to as “dead zones”. This summer, scientists mapped a “dead zone” in the Gulf of Mexico, near the mouth of the Mississippi River, with an area of approximately 7,900 square miles, roughly the size of New Jersey. Approximately two-thirds of Wisconsin’s land area drains to the Mississippi River.
- Midwest Environmental Advocates (“MEA”) is the first and only non-profit environmental law center in Wisconsin. MEA provides legal and technical support to grassroots groups that are working for environmental justice in the Western Great Lakes region.