

Midwest Environmental Advocates · Clean Wisconsin · National Wildlife Federation · Natural Resources Defense Council · Sierra Club – John Muir Chapter
Wisconsin Environmental Law Advocates

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**Conservationists Applaud City of Ashland, DNR Decision
To Protect the Public from Sewage Pollution**

ASHLAND – Conservationists today applauded the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources' (DNRs') and City of Ashland's efforts to move forward with improvements to the city's wastewater treatment works to avoid continued overflows of sewage into Lake Superior in violation of its discharge permit. The sewage overflows are the result of rainwater and snowmelt getting into and overwhelming the City's sewage underground collection pipes.

"It is clear to us that the City is taking this seriously and is working on a plan to address the problem," said Andrew Hanson, staff attorney with Midwest Environmental Advocates ("MEA"), a nonprofit environmental law center that initially raised concerns about the City's sewage treatment problems. "The next step is to involve the public to the greatest extent possible so that Ashland can make the best decision about how to protect Lake Superior from continued sewage overflows."

In a proposal to renew the City of Ashland's sewage treatment permit, the DNR had initially proposed to allow the City to bypass a portion of the treatment process during rain and snowmelt events and discharging inadequately treated sewage instead of reducing the amount of rainfall and snowmelt in the pipes so as to provide full treatment. The partially treated mixture of sewage and rainwater would have been discharged to Lake Superior, dumping a harmful load of bacteria, viruses, and toxins into the lake.

However, after objections from local residents and conservationists, the DNR withdrew the authorization to bypass treatment in favor of continuing to work with the City to improve the treatment capacity of the plant and identify the causes of the sewer overflows. The DNR also made clear that both sewage overflows and bypassing are prohibited under the terms of the City's discharge permit.

"Sewage blending is not risk-free. Taking our kids to the beach should be fun, not life-threatening," said Caryl Terrell, Chapter Director, statewide John Muir Chapter - Sierra club.

"Ashland's agreement to clean up sewage properly will better protect the local residents from bacteria, parasites and viruses that wind up in our water," said Laurel O'Sullivan, an attorney with the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), which worked with state conservation

groups to raise awareness about sewage overflows. “It’s a serious problem. Inadequately treated sewage can cause illnesses ranging from diarrhea and vomiting and respiratory infections to hepatitis and dysentery.”

At the national level, NRDC has been involved in negotiations with the Bush Administration and the National Association of Clean Water Agencies to develop guidelines for how cities like Ashland should address sewage overflows without resorting to bypassing.

“The hard work now is to solve this problem once and for all,” Hanson added.

FAST FACTS

- Routine bypassing of the sewage treatment plant is unauthorized under the federal Clean Water Act and its implementing regulations, which prohibit the intentional diversion of wastewater around any portion of the treatment facility unless full treatment is not feasible.
- In May the U.S. House of Representatives voted to defeat the U.S. EPA’s proposed policy to allow routine bypassing of sewage treatment. Subsequently, the U.S. EPA officially withdrew its proposal. The U.S. EPA has since declined to interpret its regulations to allow sewage bypassing.
- Midwest Environmental Advocates, Inc. is a nonprofit environmental law center providing legal representation and technical assistance to communities working for clean air, clean water, and clean government.
- Midwest Environmental Advocates submitted formal objections to the DNR’s proposal for the City of Ashland on behalf of and in close cooperation with Clean Wisconsin, National Wildlife Federation, Natural Resources Defense Council, Sierra Club – John Muir Chapter, and Wisconsin Environmental Law Advocates.