

Background on EPA's Sanitary Sewer Overflow (SSO) Effort

EPA New England is using a wide range of compliance tools to launch a multifaceted effort to combat the serious water quality problems caused by Sanitary Sewer Overflows (SSOs) in Rhode Island's waterways. In cooperation with the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management (RIDEM), EPA is integrating a "carrot and stick" approach to achieving environmental compliance to support its SSO effort. By offering compliance assistance workshops and training, in addition to utilizing enforcement authorities, EPA's intent is to work with all of Rhode Island's municipalities that have wastewater collection systems. Our long-term goal is to completely eliminate sanitary sewer overflows that contribute to water quality problems in RI's treasured waterways.

As part of this effort, communities will be asked to assess the adequacy of their wastewater collection systems and associated procedures for operation and maintenance, and to propose measures to correct any identified problems. EPA's work is designed to encourage improvements in the operation, maintenance, and management of wastewater collection systems. This effort supports National, Regional and State priorities to reduce bacteria in water and to focus on the need to promote sustainable water infrastructure.



EPA Launches Effort to Rid Ocean State Waters of Harmful Sewage Overflows

Understanding SSOs

SSOs are caused by breakdowns in the system of pipes, pumps and other equipment that municipalities and wastewater utilities use to collect and transport sewage to a wastewater treatment plant. These unpermitted discharges often occur due to blockages caused by roots, debris, or fats, oils and grease; structural, mechanical or electrical failures; and extraneous flows (groundwater or rainwater) that enter wastewater collection systems. Many of the problems can be linked to inadequate maintenance. Implementation of effective preventative maintenance programs has been shown to significantly reduce the frequency and volume of these discharges.

When a SSO occurs, raw sewage is released from the wastewater collection system and may end up in streets, basements, or surface waters. Discharges of untreated sewage from SSOs are a significant cause of water quality violations in New England. Recently, a ruptured sewer main in Barrington Cove spilled more than 15,000 gallons of raw sewage into Allin's Cove and Upper Narragansett Bay, prompting health warnings for those wishing to partake in an annual New Year's Day swim in the Bay. EPA is committed to putting an end to such incidents. As in other New England states, Rhode Island's beaches and shellfish beds are regularly closed when untreated sewage gets into the water. Significant property damage may also result from sewage backups into homes and other structures.



SSOs contain human waste and other debris, such as toilet paper.

Photo: courtesy of EPA Region 6

When a Sanitary Sewer Overflow occurs, raw sewage is released from the wastewater collection system and may end up in streets, basements, or surface waters.

EPA's Approach

EPA plans to combine a traditional enforcement approach with offering technical assistance and training to all communities across Rhode Island to help them eliminate SSOs in the state. History has shown that some of EPA's greatest compliance successes have been realized by combining enforcement and compliance assistance to targeted geographic areas or industrial sectors. This effort to address SSOs in Rhode Island will help to ensure the long-term vitality and health of the Ocean State's most valuable resource—its coastal beaches and waters, as well as to encourage long-term planning for sustainable infrastructure in every city and town in the State.

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Assistance and Training

EPA's assistance efforts will help municipalities identify and prevent problems with the operation and maintenance of their wastewater collection infrastructure, and will ultimately provide them with guidance on how to develop long-term management and investment plans for future protection. EPA will provide technical resources to assist municipalities with these tasks. For example, EPA technical experts will provide municipalities with instruction on an evaluation process called "Capacity, Management, Operation & Maintenance," or "CMOM"—an effective assessment tool for wastewater collection systems that also helps identify potential future problems.

EPA conducted an initial CMOM workshop for Rhode Island municipalities on December 12, 2006, in Warwick, and additional CMOM assistance will be provided through 2007, including specific guidance on how to generate a CMOM plan. Training will also be provided on "Asset Management" and management system approaches for municipalities that are ready to advance beyond operations planning. EPA staff is developing a wastewater collection system preventative maintenance template, and will be available to assist communities that want to use it. In addition, EPA has launched a regional web site at: www.epa.gov/ne/sso/ri to provide more information on preventing SSOs, and RIDEM has offered assistance resources to help municipalities as they move forward.

Enforcement

EPA New England has taken a number of administrative and judicial enforcement actions in other New England states



Two overflowing manholes flooding a street and parking lot in Rhode Island with contaminated water.

against municipalities for violations of federal Clean Water Act requirements due to SSOs. EPA intends to issue Administrative Orders to cities and towns that have SSOs. The Orders will require cities and towns to assess the adequacy of their wastewater collection systems and associated operation and maintenance practices and to propose measures to correct deficiencies. Communities may also be targeted for inspections. All communities will be notified by mail of the need to take action to address SSOs in their own system. A few communities, including those with the most egregious SSO noncompliance, may also be targeted for penalty actions. In establishing enforcement priorities, EPA will consider the significant steps taken by a municipality to correct conditions leading to SSOs.

Outreach and Information

This SSO effort was announced in January through a letter sent to all Rhode Island municipalities that own or operate wastewater collection systems. Specifically, the letter was sent to chief officials in each municipality with copies to operations officials such as Department of Public Works and wastewater treatment plant managers. EPA is also reaching out to stakeholders such as the Rhode Island League of Cities and Towns and the New England Chapter of the American Public Works Association to inform them of EPA's efforts and to seek support and collaboration as we work to eliminate SSOs in the State of Rhode Island.

Web site

For more information on EPA New England's SSO initiative visit:
www.epa.gov/ne/sso/ri

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