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# An upstate plan to keep raw sewage out of Hudson



Riverkeeper, an environmental organization, tests the Hudson monthly for sewage pollution. (AP Photo/Mary Esch)



By Scott Waldman Jan. 16, 2014

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ALBANY—A group of six upstate cities will stop dumping raw sewage into the Hudson River as part of a \$140 million sewer upgrade plan.

During periods of heavy rain or significant snowmelt, the wastewater treatment plants that serve Albany, Troy, Rensselaer, Cohoes, Watervliet and the village of Green Island quickly become overwhelmed and spew human waste directly into the Hudson. That has caused significant pollution and has shut down stretches of the river to recreational use for days, and even weeks, at a time.

“This is an excellent example of how communities can work together for the interest of their communities and ratepayers,” Cohoes assemblyman John McDonald said.

Under the plan, an outline of which was obtained by Capital, the cities will upgrade their wastewater treatment infrastructure to capture and treat 85 percent of the combined sewer overflow volume. Following a storm, the river will now be safe about 10 hours after the rain stops, compared to the days it now takes.

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That sewer discharge leads to stretches of fecal contamination that can make people ill, said John Lipscomb, a water quality monitor and boat captain for Riverkeeper, an environmental advocacy group.

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“It's a big issue throughout the estuary and nationwide,” he said.

The Albany region fails federal swimming guidelines more often than New York City and dumps more than a billion gallons of raw sewage into the river annually, Lipscomb said. Still, New York sewers discharge 28 billion gallons of sewage and rainwater runoff in to the river every year, he said. About 20 percent of that is raw sewage.

Sewage can cause algae blooms that choke out aquatic life. It also can also cause illness in humans who swim and wade in the river or otherwise come in to contact with the water. Federal law prevents raw sewage discharge into the river, but the state has been lax to enforce it. In the Albany region, sewage is discharged into the river almost a hundred times a year.

Under the new plan, the communities will create a long-term control plan to reduce the amount of raw sewage spewed into the river. The agreement requires city sewer districts, along with those in Rensselaer and Albany county, to upgrade their systems. It took years to hammer out, [and an earlier plan was rejected by the state](#) for not doing enough to reduce pollution.

Aging sewer systems that discharge into the river during storms have been a significant source of pollution. In July, Columbia University researchers found drug-resistant bacteria in the river south of the Tappan Zee Bridge because of sewer overflows in New York.

Wastewater treatment systems statewide need about \$36 billion in improvements, according to the Department of Environmental Conservation. Many local communities don't have the money necessary to pay for those improvements. State legislators [wanted to put a \\$5 billion bond plan](#) to voters to begin to address critical sewer upgrades, but Gov. Andrew Cuomo's surprise support of an alternative education plan has essentially killed that idea.

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When EPA implemented the CWA it used an essential water pollution test (the BOD) test incorrect and not only ignored 60% of the oxygen demanding pollution, but also all the nitrogenous (urine and protein) waste. This waste, besides exerting an oxygen demand also is a fertilizer for algae and for each pound will grow 20 pound of new algae, contributing to dead zones, when the algae die. This type of ignored pollution in sewage is now called 'nutrient' pollution, but mostly blamed on the runoffs from farms and cities.

Before any more money is spent people should demand first that the CWA is implemented as intended. Unfortunately that first means that those directly and even indirectly have to admit that such a basic mistake has been and still is made, what appears to be impossible.

The recent chemical spill that closed water treatment plants will make people aware that treatment, especially in sewage, as well as water treatment plants is limited and both still not capable of treating many industrial chemicals, since they are based on more than century old technologies, not any longer suited for a modern industrialized society. The solution sadly for many such chemicals is still dilution. Really time to hold EPA, as well as State authorities accountable, before any more time and money is wasted on programs doomed to fail.

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