

# About the Sewage Overflow Issue



**Q:** What is a sewage overflow?

**A:** During nearly every rainfall or snow melt, excess water gets into the municipal sewage systems, which results in untreated sewage overflowing into area streams and rivers. These overflows violate the Environmental Protection Agency's federal Clean Water Act.

**Q:** What is the difference between a separate sanitary sewer system and a combined sewer system?

**A:** A separate sanitary sewer system is designed to carry only wastewater to the treatment plant. Stormwater is carried in a separate system, and is not transported to the treatment plant. In a combined sewer system, both wastewater and stormwater are carried in the same pipes. Of the 83 communities in the ALCOSAN service area, 26 have been identified as having primarily a combined sewer system within their municipal boundaries. The remaining 57 communities have separate sanitary sewage collection systems.

**Q:** What is the Clean Water Act and how does it affect our region?

**A:** The Clean Water Act was enacted in 1972 and prohibits any person or entity from discharging pollutants, such as sewage, from a point source into waterways unless a permit is obtained. Under

this Act, only combined sewer discharges can be permitted but the volume and frequency of overflows must be significantly reduced. Discharges from separate sewers are prohibited under the Act.

**Q:** How bad is the sewage overflow problem in the region?

**A:** Each year, these overflows affect Pittsburgh's rivers nearly half of the 140-day boating season (May 15- October 1) making water unacceptable for recreational contact. In addition, the overflows affect Allegheny County's primary source of drinking water because nearly 90 percent of Allegheny County residents get their drinking water from Pittsburgh's rivers. Rehabilitating the sewer infrastructure is the largest public works project the Pittsburgh region has ever faced; municipalities in the ALCOSAN service area could face a potential \$4 billion investment in order to correct the problem.

**Q:** How does the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) enforce the Clean Water Act?

**A:** Municipalities have been under an EPA administrative consent order since 2004 to assess and repair their systems in accordance with the Clean Water Act. The consent order is a legal document that is signed by both the community and an enforcement agency that binds the community to complete specific activities that will lead to the elimination or reduction of sewage overflows in their municipal collection system. The municipal consent orders are enforced locally by the Allegheny County Health Department and the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection. If the community does not meet the requirements of the order, the enforcement agency imposes fines.

**Q: What does the administrative consent order require?**

**A:** The administrative consent order requires communities to address the sewage overflow issue through specific activities, such as mapping, cleaning, televising the sewer system, and making critical repairs. Flow monitoring is also a requirement because it measures how much wastewater (and in some cases, stormwater) the sewage system is carrying during both dry and wet weather. This information helps communities develop a long-term wet weather control plan, in cooperation with ALCOSAN for the operation and maintenance of the sewage system. While the municipal consent orders will end in 2015, communities must prepare to implement a long-term control plan that will include major rehabilitation of the sewage infrastructure.

**Q: How will communities financially accomplish the tasks required?**

**A:** Fixing the sewage overflow problem in the region's municipal collection system could cost up to \$4 billion for the ALCOSAN communities. However, 3 Rivers Wet Weather, local municipal officials and engineers are exploring ways to share resources and costs to develop more cost-effective regional solutions. Communities have been encouraged to begin budgeting for these activities as a priority in their municipality's annual budget. However, to create a truly cost-effective sustainable solution to the problem, municipalities will need to consider options for consolidating their sewage collection systems.

**Q: What is my role as a homeowner?**

**A:** It is important to become educated on the sewage overflow issue because every individual can play a role in helping to solve the problem. As a homeowner, you are responsible for the maintenance and repair of your house lateral, a pipe that connects your home to the public sewer system. A cracked or deteriorated lateral

or one filled with tree roots can allow groundwater to seep into the system contributing to the problem. In addition, if your community has a separate sanitary sewer system, you may be required to fix any improper connections, such as downspouts, driveway drains or sump pumps connected directly to the sewer system. The stormwater collected from these devices must be drained to your property or directly connected to a separate stormwater system.

**Q: Will sewage rates go up?**

**A:** Yes, it is likely that nearly all communities in the ALCOSAN service area and ALCOSAN will continue to raise their sewage rates at some point to help pay for the cost of correcting the sewage overflow problem. Historically, the region's sewage rates were among the lowest in the country. In addition, communities working through the 3 Rivers Wet Weather Basin Groups will be able to minimize their sewage rate increases by participating in regional cooperative projects. EPA guidelines do address the region's affordability for sewer infrastructure repair based on the County's median household income.

**Q: What role does 3 Rivers Wet Weather play in helping communities address the wet weather issue?**

**A:** 3 Rivers Wet Weather will continue to take a lead role in helping communities tackle this problem through a basin-wide approach. The organization helped to facilitate the communication between the municipalities and the regulatory agencies which led to a feasible consent order signed by the ALCOSAN communities in early 2004. In addition, 3RWW has funded and coordinated system-wide compliance activities and created important online tools, such as a data warehouse for regional mapping and the sharing of other data to help build the foundation for regional sustainability of our sewage infrastructure for generations to come.

**Q: Are other regions of the United States struggling with the same problems?**

**A:** Yes, primarily older cities in the northeastern United States are struggling with the sewage overflow issue because they, too, have old and deteriorated sewer systems. Many of these cities are also under consent orders to fix the problem. However, Allegheny County is unique because it is the only location in the country in which 83 municipalities own and operate their own sewage collection system, and all of these systems feed into one sewage treatment facility (ALCOSAN).

