

U.S. Could Let Milwaukee Dump Sewage Into Lake, Group Says

By Gary Wisby

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Milwaukee could dump unlimited amounts of partially treated sewage into Lake Michigan under a Bush administration proposal, a lake watchdog group charged Tuesday.

The policy change pushed by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency would permit discharges of "blended" wastewater -- a mix of raw and treated sewage -- at any time, not just after heavy rains, the Lake Michigan Federation said.

"Milwaukee is where we would see this used most," said federation executive director Cameron Davis. "We shouldn't allow sewage bypasses to become common practice."

Today is the deadline for U.S. House members to sign a letter to the EPA opposing the change. Illinois' congressmen from lakefront districts -- Republican Mark Kirk and Democrats Melissa Bean, Jan Schakowsky, Rahm Emanuel, Luis Gutierrez, Danny Davis and Jesse Jackson Jr. -- have signed. None of their Wisconsin counterparts has.

Mayor Daley wrote the agency last month to say he, too, is against expanding the practice.

The case for wastewater

Milwaukee and other wastewater plant operators argue it's better to release blended sewage than raw sewage into the lake when their plants are overtaxed.

But Daley's letter says the federal government should help pay for improvements "to more effectively help avoid the need to discharge untreated sewage in the first place."

"We've spent a lot on Deep Tunnel," the region's massive storm water retention system, Davis said. "It's not fair for other municipalities that haven't done that work to get off the hook."

Sewage threatens health and leads to beach closings, he said. And adding more chlorine to kill bacteria could affect the taste of drinking water, Lt. Gov. Pat Quinn said at a lakefront appearance with Davis.