

**City gets blame for polluted beaches;□
Closings in Illinois linked to sewage dumping here**
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Eight Illinois lawmakers on Friday asked federal environmental officials to stop Milwaukee from dumping sewage into Lake Michigan, saying the dumpings are to blame for a dramatic increase in beach closings in Illinois over the past eight years.

In a letter to U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Christie Whitman, the members of Congress blamed Milwaukee for Illinois' record 339 Lake Michigan beach closings last year -- up from 10 in 1994.

"We believe that EPA involvement is particularly necessary because Milwaukee's disposal of waste into Lake Michigan poses dangerous consequences to Illinois, Indiana and some parts of Michigan," they wrote.

But the Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District dismissed the claim as "laughable" and said it was unfair to blame Milwaukee or any city for the problem. "I'm very concerned that the emphasis in beach closings continues to be on any sewerage district -- no matter where it is -- when studies in Racine, Milwaukee, Detroit and Chicago show that other things are causing them besides overflows," said Kevin Shafer, executive director of MMSD.

Shafer said the most likely sources of Chicago's beach closings are gull droppings and storm water runoff that make their way into the lake.

"It's laughable to see that overflows aren't causing beach closings here (in Milwaukee), yet they think we're causing beaches to close in Chicago," he said.

While there have been numerous beach closings in Milwaukee, MMSD has said the primary reasons for them are upstream cow pasture runoff, and bird or pet droppings. Some MMSD officials, however, have acknowledged that sewage dumping might contribute to the problem.

MMSD has dumped about 13 billion gallons of untreated waste into local waterways since the deep tunnel system of underground storage tunnels opened in late 1993. The tunnel project was supposed to virtually eliminate dumping.

The sewerage district has said the dumping was excusable because of unusually heavy rainstorms. MMSD also has stressed that the 13 billion gallons dumped is far less than the estimated 8 billion gallons dumped each year before the deep tunnel system was built.

The argument resurrects the central issue in a federal lawsuit filed by Illinois against the City of Milwaukee in the 1970s. Although the city ultimately won on appeal before the U.S. Supreme Court, the lawsuit helped shape construction of Milwaukee's deep tunnels, the 17-mile-long network of massive sewers more than 250 feet underground.

In their letter, the lawmakers -- led by U.S. Rep. Janice Schakowsky, a Chicago Democrat, asked the EPA to "take immediate action" to halt the dumping of raw sewage into Lake Michigan.

"Milwaukee discharges a larger amount of waste into Lake Michigan than any other city," they wrote. "We believe that EPA involvement is particularly necessary because Milwaukee's disposal of waste into Lake Michigan poses dangerous consequences to Illinois, Indiana and some parts of Michigan.

"It is unacceptable that one city's harmful wastewater disposal practices should be allowed to endanger the health of citizens throughout the region," they added.

EPA spokesman Luke Hester said Friday he had not seen the letter and could not comment.

Effort draws praise

Environmentalists applauded the move by the Illinois lawmakers, while water-quality researchers said it was unlikely, but not impossible, for sewage discharged in Milwaukee to contribute to high bacteria levels along the Illinois shoreline.

J. Val Klump, who directs the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's Great Lakes WATER Institute, agreed with Shafer, saying it was "a stretch" to suggest that overflows in Milwaukee were causing a problem in Illinois.

"Swimming beaches all over the U.S. are being closed because of high E. coli levels. And one of the reasons is we're starting to measure for the first time. We're exceeding limits because we've never looked before," Klump said.

A new study by the U.S. Geological Survey found that gull droppings accounted for 40% of the high E. coli levels at one Chicago beach and that there was no evidence to suggest that any particular municipality was to blame.

However, Richard Whitman, chief of the Lake Michigan Ecological Research Station in Porter, Ind., said it was not impossible for bacteria to migrate along the shoreline.

"It's not absurd to me," said Whitman, who studied E. coli levels at the 63rd St. beach in Chicago.

"If these bacteria are on particles, and they can live for months and months at a time along the bottom, then it's not inconceivable that they can be transported along the shore and be dispersed," he said.

Bob Boucher, executive director of Friends of Milwaukee's Rivers, commended the Illinois lawmakers for taking the action, saying "it makes no sense to let the outhouse flow into the well."

He blamed overflows -- and not gull droppings -- for the problems.

"You can't take the billion gallons that MMSD has discharged in the local waterways and point to sea gulls or a goose or somebody's dog," Boucher said. "These things . . . may be contributing to some bacteria, but it's a little absurd to say that that's the source of it."