

**Illinois congressmen blame pollution on Milwaukee** 05/24/02

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by DENNIS CONRAD

Eight Illinois congressmen fired off a letter Friday to federal environmental officials urging immediate action to protect Lake Michigan from Milwaukee sewage they blame for frequent beach closures.

"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," wrote the congressmen, led by Rep. Janice Schakowsky, D-Chicago.

"It is unacceptable that one city's harmful wastewater disposal practices should be allowed to endanger the health of citizens throughout the region." But before Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Christine Todd Whitman could reply, the Wisconsin official who oversees Milwaukee's sewerage system had a message for the politicians across the state line.

Get serious.

It's not Milwaukee's sewage causing the problem, but urban stormwater runoff, particularly bacteria from seagulls, according to Kevin Shafer, executive director of the Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District.

"It's almost laughable our overflows are causing beach closings in Chicago," Shafer said. "The seagulls poop, and that runoff carries the poop to the beaches, and that closes the beaches."

In their letter, the congressmen cited Illinois' record 339 Lake Michigan beach closings last year, up from 10 in 1994.

"While increased monitoring may have some effect on the number of closings, there is overwhelming evidence to suggest that sewage overflows from Milwaukee are responsible for much of the deteriorating beach health conditions in Illinois," the congressmen wrote.

They acknowledged that Chicago has sewage overflows, too, but said it was not as big a problem because Chicago's usually flow away from the beaches.

"Milwaukee, Wisconsin, produces a greater, more serious level of waste," they added.

Shafer countered that the University of Wisconsin Great Lake Institute did a study last year that found urban runoff caused a Milwaukee beach to close. He said a U.S. Geological Survey study reached a similar conclusion in Chicago. The studies generally indicated that seagulls contributed 80 percent or more of the runoff bacteria, he added.

Laurel Sullivan, an attorney for the Lake Michigan Federation, a Chicago-based environmental group, acknowledged that seagull droppings have been found responsible for some beach closures around the country. Sullivan, however, said city officials often blame the birds to divert attention from themselves.

"Clearly, you've got more than seagull poop responsible for the beach closings," she said.

Sullivan said Milwaukee's own reports show it has put 13 billion gallons of untreated wastewater into Lake Michigan since 1994.

Shafer said Milwaukee has no EPA enforcement actions pending against it and has not for decades. He said the sewerage system currently has \$1 billion in improvements on the drawing board for the coming decade.

EPA spokeswoman Robin Woods had no immediate comment.

The congressmen signing the letter were all Democrats: from Chicago's Schakowsky, Rod Blagojevich, Danny Davis, Bobby Rush and Jesse Jackson Jr., to Lane Evans, Jerry Costello and David Phelps in central and southern Illinois.