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THE RUSH TO FLUSH

*Groups call for legislation, planning and enforcement
to protect Gulf of Mexico from sewage*

A report on the current condition of thousands of domestic wastewater treatment facilities along the Gulf Coast of Florida (from Pensacola to Key West) reveals that decades of poor planning and lax enforcement of the Clean Water Act has created an infrastructure meltdown in many coastal communities. The information for the report was researched and compiled by the Clean Water Network of Florida over a two year period ending in 2008.

The research found that many of Florida's domestic wastewater facilities are either over-capacity at times or simply not performing at levels for which they are designed. The Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) frequently allows permits to expire for extended periods of time (when the plants cannot comply with previous permits), issues permits that are not protective of surface and/or groundwater standards, and is inconsistent if not lax on enforcement.

"Few people in Florida think about where their sewage ends up," says Linda Young, director of the Clean Water Network of Florida and author of the report. "We assume that the government is protecting us and the environment, but this is not always the case. It is not uncommon for people to be swimming right next to a sewage outfall pipe and not even realize it."

In recent years Florida has seen unprecedented durations of red-tide and other harmful algal blooms, massive fish kills, and contaminated beaches – all of which can be linked to excessive nutrients and bacteria. Sewage plant discharges contain both pollutants and while all of Florida's water quality problems do not originate from domestic wastewater facilities, the report clearly demonstrates that by its sheer volume,

sewage plant discharges (to groundwater and surface waters) are a major contributor to polluted coastal waters.

As citizens across the state watch more of their local waters become unsafe for swimming and more frequent incidents of overflowing manholes, they search for elected officials who will take action to prevent or correct infrastructure problems in their communities. While money is always an issue, some community leaders find creative ways to get much needed improvements funded and under construction. Other utility violators get adept at the cat and mouse game with DEP. Unfortunately, DEP is like a cat without claws or even a sense of smell – often ignoring glaring violations and cries for help from beleaguered citizens.

“In Wakulla, we sometimes see raw sewage over-flowing from manholes and running into nearby ditches and creeks,” said Rich Johnson, a local concerned citizen. “We were lucky to find a health department official who said he would help us track down the problems and start looking for solutions.”

Overwhelmed or inadequate sewage systems are not just an inconvenience for would-be swimmers, they affect our fisheries, shell-fish waters and tourism industry as well.

“Unless Florida comes to grips and acknowledges that our leaky sewage infrastructure is turning our pristine rivers into sewers, we will continue to have polluted beaches,” said Jack Rudloe, director of Gulf Specimen Marine Laboratory. “We are already witnessing the demise of aquaculture with toxic dinoflagellates infecting shrimp hatchers. How can you grow shrimp, clams and oysters in waters that are over enriched by sewage, which contributes to toxic blooms of red tide organisms?”

In a more perfect world, operators and owners of sewage treatment plants would make concerted efforts to stay within the limits of their permits and would avoid major problems with regular maintenance and prevention programs. However, many of Florida’s wastewater facilities are struggling to keep up with the over-whelming increases in flows from rampant growth and have little or no time to think about improvements. The regulatory consequences for spills, overflows, upsets and outright destruction of important resources are minor if they exist at all.

“The results shown in this report, while troubling, are entirely expected due to years of lax enforcement,” said Jerry Phillips, Director of Florida PEER and a former enforcement attorney with the FDEP. “The FDEP’s own data confirms that the agency has changed from an agency that once cared first about the environment and enforcement of Florida’s laws to one that is now more concerned about quick settlements that do not require additional agency oversight. To the great delight of polluters, ‘Pay-to-Pollute’ continues to be the agency’s policy.”

Citizens who want more information about sewage treatment and disposal in their communities can contact Clean Water Network of Florida at 850/222-8701 or cwnfl@earthlink.net.

Clean Water Network of Florida have more than 200 group members and thousands of individuals who work together to protect Florida’s springs, wetlands, rivers, estuaries and coastal waters.