

"Federation Corner" column
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Frequently broken WSSC sewer lines

by Neil Fitzpatrick, Director

from September 2004 *Audubon Naturalist*, by permission

Audubon Naturalist Society (ANS) of the Central Atlantic States has added our name to a collaborative effort to raise public awareness about the chronic leaks from Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission (WSSC) sewer lines. WSSC is one of the ten largest water and wastewater utilities in the country. Its mission is "to provide safe and reliable water, life's most precious resource, and return clean water to our environment, all in a financially responsible manner." Despite this objective, WSSC has reported more than 30 sewer overflows into streams and rivers in Prince George's and Montgomery counties this year, and estimates that the overflows total some 75,000 gallons of raw sewage. This represents a serious public health problem to the many citizens who enjoy using our streams and rivers for recreational purposes.

ANS Conservation Associate Dolores Milmoie and I met in mid-June with our colleagues at the Anacostia Watershed Society (AWS) and the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) to catch up with their research into the leaking sewer line problems at WSSC. Also attending the meeting were representatives from the Friends of Sligo Creek.

The chronic sewer line leaks are no surprise to anyone but the public. The Maryland Department of the Environment, the regulatory agency responsible for implementing the Clean Water Act in Maryland, has years of WSSC compliance reports indicating sewer-line leaks in the hundreds of miles of pipes that run along side of Maryland rivers and streams. For more than a year, WSSC leaders and representatives of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Maryland Department of the Environment, and the U.S. Department of Justice have been meeting in an effort to reach consensus about what to do, how long it should take, how much it will cost to fix, and, of course, who will pay.

All capital improvements for WSSC go through the budget process in both Prince George's County and Montgomery County. The governance of WSSC is complicated—three commissioners from each county are appointed by the county executives, and then these commissioners must be approved by the county council in each county. The commissioners and those who appointed and approved them should be aware that sewer pipes are leaking throughout the WSSC service area. Why wasn't acknowledging the problem and coming up with a plan to fix them made a priority?

Aging sewer and water treatment infrastructure is a national problem. Neither Republican nor Democratic administrations have had the political will to address the problem in a comprehensive manner. Almost ten years ago, the Environmental Protection Agency reported on the estimated capital costs for both drinking water and sewer system improvements needed to comply with the Clean Water Act. For the EPA report to Congress ten years ago, the State of Maryland estimated that \$1.6 billion would be needed for wastewater treatment and collection system work. Since WSSC is the largest water utility in Maryland, a significant percentage of the Maryland total represents WSSC capital needs.

In April, the Maryland General Assembly passed a bill proposed by Governor Ehrlich called the Chesapeake and Atlantic Coastal Bays Restoration Fund. The goal of the new law is to upgrade Maryland's sewage treatment plants, to upgrade or replace failing septic systems, and to provide farmers with cost-share assistance to plant cover crops. The costs of the newly mandated nutrient reduction actions will be covered by a \$2.50 monthly charge on all sewer bills and a \$30 annual fee directed at the owners of septic systems. Only a small portion of the new funds raised (\$5,000,000 annually) would be available for statewide improvements to upgrade sewer infrastructure. Funding to fix leaking WSSC sewer pipes, and other leaking sewer lines around the state, will have to come from somewhere else.

Our coalition met with John Griffin and other WSSC staff, just before he left his position as general manager. We had a list, prepared by the Anacostia Watershed Society's Larry J. Silverman, of what we want WSSC to do to improve its sewage system pipelines. The list started with eliminating discharges of untreated sanitary sewage from WSSC collection lines into streams and ground water and included WSSC taking a lead role in a multi-agency effort to implement a comprehensive monitoring program to determine the sewer line impacts on stream quality and public health. We also requested that WSSC improve the public process it uses to make decisions about its priorities.

The political and financial turmoil at WSSC has reached the boiling point again. The Maryland legislature has held a meeting to discuss problems and solutions; calls for change will come again from many political leaders. They will point fingers of blame in all directions. I believe there is a real danger that "reforming" WSSC will not include fixing the failing sewer pipe collection system. Yet that environmental debt, overlooked by everyone involved in making decisions about WSSC priorities, should be among the very top priorities for change.