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Maine Communities Require Federal Funding for Clean Water Environmental Programs

Maine communities continue to struggle in funding Federal and State environmental mandates.

Since the 1970's most communities have undertaken significant and expensive construction projects to make improvements to their wastewater systems. This work has included expansion or upgrading of wastewater treatments plants, separation projects to eliminate stormwater from the sewer systems or rebuilding or replacing aging and leaking sewer pipes to eliminate sources of infiltration of clean water. In addition many communities have embarked on implementing Long Term Control Plans to eliminate Combined Sewer Overflows. The environmental requirements continue to emerge. Many communities are now faced with the need to comply with stormwater regulations, elimination of arsenic and mercury and phosphorus control to name a few. In addition new rules are pending on blending and disposal of biosolids.

Complying with these unfunded mandates has taken a significant toll on the financial resources of Maine cities and towns. Many have tripled and quadrupled user fees at a pace significantly faster than the rate of inflation. They all are taking advantage of every source of funding they can locate such as utilizing the State Revolving Loan program (SRF), STAG grants, Rural Development Grants. To date these communities have borrowed \$345 million from the SRF program. Only \$48 million has been paid back and of this, \$8 million has been interest. Based on current engineering studies that have been submitted to the Maine DEP there is a need to spend an additional \$339 million. The Maine WasteWater Control Association (MWWCA) supports restoring funding for the Clean Water State Revolving Loan Funds (SRF) to at least the fiscal year 2004 level of \$1.35 billion, continuing to the SRF funding program to its original 2018 expiration, and urges Congress to provide this federal assistance. Many, such as the City of Bangor, have borrowed to the point here their loan repayments are more than half of their operating budgets. This rate of borrowing has placed many other communities in significant financial hardship. Many of the smaller poorer communities, such as those in the northern part of the state, cannot take advantage of the SRF program because they cannot afford to pay back the principal on the loan, never mind the interest. Other communities such as Augusta have had to ask for more time extensions to compliance schedules because raising rates to borrow more money is not an option with the significant loss of business and jobs that are occurring in the community.

Congress continues to heavily invest in new roads, bridges and airports. Why not underground infrastructure and Wastewater Treatment Plants as well? The MWWCA believes that in order for environmental programs to continue in the estate of Maine, Congress will need to continue funding existing and future Federal Requirements. A mixture of low interest loans, no interest loans and out right grants will be required for the programs to continue at the pace they have over the last decade. Anything less could have significant adverse results to the progress already made.

EPA Blend Flow Policy

As an active environmental protection community, engaged primarily in meeting the goals of the Clean Water Act, the MWWCA continues to strongly support blending flow as a tool for managing high flows and treating stormwater runoff during wet weather conditions. MWWCA asks Maine's congressional delegates to endorse EPA's efforts to set national guidelines for the use of blending flow (primary treatment effluent and secondary treatment

effluent). We believe formal guidance is essential to assist EPA and NPDES delegated State permit writers in writing comprehensive permit requirements that both protect public health and recognize the treatment capacity available to a Publicly Owned Treatment Works (POTW).

We support a blending policy that requires compliance with water quality based permit limitations; recognizes that blending is a valuable tool for POTW operators who must provide the best possible treatment under adverse conditions; and meets objectives of EPA's CSO Control Policy (empowers POTWs receiving excessive combined sewage flow/storm flow to treat more of it at the wastewater plant, rather than divert it from the collection system).

Mercury

MWWCA members are committed to making Maine's waters fishable and swimmable. We strongly support efforts to reduce the amount of toxic pollutants entering Maine's surface water from all sources, including air pollution. Therefore, we are grateful for Maine's congressional delegates' efforts to reduce mercury air pollution, including sponsorship, promotions and strong support of mercury pollution control and prevention legislation, and we are proud of their accomplishments.

Pretreatment Program Streamlining

Maine currently has 14 EPA/State of Maine approved pretreatment programs whereby POTWs regulate discharges of industrial wastewater at the local level. This is a very successful program that has directly resulted in significant reductions in the amount of toxic pollutants in public sewers and in treatment plant influent, effluent and biosolids (sludges). In the mid to late 1990's, the EPA requested comments on how the Pretreatment Program requirements could be improved. The result was an EPA proposed rule for "Streamlining" the Pretreatment Program. The proposal includes provisions that could help reduce staffing time and program implementation costs incurred by municipal governments. The EPA has scheduled this rule to be implemented many times. It was most recently on the schedule for February 2005. However, it has not been enacted. MWWCA believes that the Streamlining Rule would have no negative impact on the environment and would save wastewater utilities nationally hundreds of millions of dollars. Therefore, we ask that our Congressional delegates ask the EPA why it has not been able to make any progress, and to urge that the EPA finalize this rule.