

## Sewage blending: Solution or problem?

### Ken Kirk, Association of Metropolitan Sewerage Agencies

Since U.S.EPA issued its November 7, 2003, proposed guidance on blending, environmental activist groups have blatantly mischaracterized the guidance as an “environmental rollback.” Blending, a long-accepted wet weather management practice, protects the public health by preventing sewer backups into homes and businesses and safeguards the environment by maximizing the amount of wastewater a treatment plant can fully treat.

In addition to these benefits, U.S.EPA’s guidance will make more information about blending available for public comment and adds safeguards to a practice that already fully complies with Clean Water Act permits. For these reasons, key national organizations support the blending policy, including the National League of Cities, U.S. Conference of Mayors and others.

Estimates also show that municipalities would have to foot a bill of over \$200 billion in upgrades for treatment plants if blending were prohibited – money that could be better spent on projects

that would have tangible water quality benefits. Given shrinking municipal budgets, such a price tag would have a profound impact throughout the country, including for many of the municipalities within the Great Lakes Region.

U.S.EPA’s own description of its blending guidance best describes the critical need to continue with this time-tested process. The agency concludes blending will “help local governments operate their sewage treatment facilities and help prevent the overflow of raw sewage into homes and waterways during heavy rain storms. The proposed policy will provide practical solutions to local governments while maintaining and improving water quality.”

In short, this process protects against the very problem that the activist community disingenuously blames on blending – the release of untreated sewage into the nation’s waterways, including the Great Lakes. As such, EPA’s blending guidance should be made final as soon as possible.

**POINT**  
POINT



Ken Kirk is executive director of the Association of Metropolitan Sewerage Agencies

### Cyndi Roper, Clean Water Action and Clean Water Fund

Ending the anachronistic practice of sewage “blending” is long overdue.

For over 30 years, the Clean Water Act has stated that sewage overflows should end. Communities have invested in overflow elimination and, although billions of gallons of sewage still enter the Great Lakes annually, an end has been in sight.

Now U.S. EPA is proposing to eliminate the finish line. They’re telling Great Lakes residents to get used to feces, industrial and household chemicals, and other contaminants in Lake St. Clair, the Detroit River and other water bodies that serve as our drinking water sources and recreational venues.

U.S. EPA’s proposal increases the likelihood that more of us will become ill following rain events. Studies document that over half of waterborne disease outbreaks follow heavy rain-

falls. In fact, according to the Centers for Disease Control, 7.1 million cases of mild to moderate and 560,000 cases of moderate to severe infectious waterborne diseases occur annually.

To make matters worse, the administration is cutting funding for sewage infrastructure so communities will face increased competition for limited dollars. In 2002, Michigan voters approved a \$1 billion bond earmarked primarily for sewer improvements. Michiganders, like others who live in the Great Lakes basin, understand the need to get sewage out of local waters. Why doesn’t the Bush Administration?

Forcing communities to continue choosing between sewage back-ups in basements and overflows into area waterways is bad public policy. Those who care about protecting public health and Great Lakes water quality should work together to keep the finish line in place.

**counterpoint**  
counterpoint



Cyndi Roper is Great Lakes policy director of Clean Water Action and Clean Water Fund

*The views expressed are those of the authors or the organizations they represent alone and do not necessarily reflect those of the Great Lakes Commission or its member jurisdictions.*