



Testimony of John Rumpler, Environment America
House Appropriations Committee -- February 6, 2020

Good afternoon. My name is John Rumpler. I am Senior Attorney and Clean Water Program Director for Environment America. I am here to testify in support of dramatically increased funding in the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) budget for both the Clean Water State Revolving Fund (SRF) and the Drinking Water SRF.

As a national organization working to protect the places we love and promote core environmental values, Environment America strongly supports these vital programs to fund the water infrastructure our environment deserves and our health demands. And, as a citizen-supported group with affiliates in 29 states, we know the public agrees.

Of the many reasons to repair and strengthen our nation's water infrastructure, my testimony today will focus on one: protecting our health.

Congress should triple annual Clean Water SRF funding to stop sewage overflows and runoff pollution

Each year, billions of gallons of sewage overflows and stormwater runoff pollute our beaches, rivers, and other waterways with pathogens. This pollution puts the public's health at risk. Last summer, my research team found that more than half of beach sites tested in 29 coastal and Great Lakes states had levels of fecal bacteria in the water that put swimmers at risk of getting sick in 2018.¹ Each year, there are an estimated 57 million instances of people getting sick from swimming in U.S. waterways - including acute gastrointestinal illness, ear infections, and skin rashes.²

¹ John Rumpler, *Safe for Swimming?* Environment America Research & Policy Center, July 2019 accessible at <https://environmentamerica.org/feature/ame/safe-swimming>

² See Table 3: Stephanie DeFlorio-Barker et al., *Estimate of Incidence and Cost of Recreational Waterborne Illness on United States Surface Waters*, *Environ Health*, 9 January 2018, available online at <https://ehjournal.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12940-017-0347-9>

Clearly, our wastewater infrastructure is no longer up to the core task of preventing pollution and disease. Pipes, septic tanks, and treatment facilities have exceeded their intended lifespans and are breaking down. The American Society of Civil Engineers gave the nation's wastewater infrastructure a D+ grade in its 2017 report card.

In 2012, the EPA estimated that we will need \$271 billion over the next twenty years to maintain and repair our wastewater infrastructure to meet current environmental and health standards.³ That's \$13 billion a year.

There is reason to believe the cost of adequate wastewater infrastructure is even higher now. Sewage and runoff pollution are likely to get worse in coming years, as climate change increases the likelihood and severity of storms and flooding. In a recent example, a treatment plant overwhelmed by flooding in Nebraska has been releasing 1 million gallons of sewage into the Missouri River every day since last spring.⁴ Moreover, our wastewater systems are now facing other environmental and pollution challenges not adequately foreseen in 2012 - including pharmaceutical waste, microplastics, and toxic per-fluorinated compounds (commonly known as PFAS).

For all of these reasons, Environment America and 20 other organizations have urged Congress to increase funding for the Clean Water SRF to \$6 billion per year.

Yet dramatically increasing federal investment in wastewater infrastructure is only one part of the solution. We must also spend the money wisely.

By investing in natural and green infrastructure, we can not only curb sewage overflows but also prevent runoff pollution and improve the health of our communities. Low-tech, decentralized techniques such as rain barrels, permeable pavement and rooftop gardens can absorb up to 90 percent of rainfall, reducing the flow of stormwater that cause sewage overflows and sweep pathogens, oil and grease, and other pollution into local waterways.⁵ Restoring or expanding natural infrastructure - such as wetlands or other greenspace - also help protect our communities from flooding and replenish groundwater.⁶

For all of these reasons, we also recommend that the Appropriations Committee dedicate at least 20 percent of Clean Water SRF funding to natural and green infrastructure projects that prevent water pollution.

³ U.S. EPA Clean Watersheds Needs Survey - 2012 Report and Data, accessed online 29 January 2020 at <https://www.epa.gov/cwns/clean-watersheds-needs-survey-cwns-2012-report-and-data>

⁴ Tara Campbell, *Raw Sewage Dumped into Missouri River*; WOWT, 8 January 2020, accessed at <https://www.wowt.com/content/news/Hundreds-of-millions-of-raw-sewage-dumped-into-Missouri-River-amidst-call-s-for-testing-566827971.html>

⁵ Elizabeth Berg, Frontier Group; Luke Metzger and Brian Zabcik, *Environment Texas, Catching the Rain: How Green Infrastructure Can Reduce Flooding and Improve Water Quality in Texas*, Winter 2017.

⁶ Ibid.

Congress should dramatically increase Drinking Water SRF funding to “get the lead out” and take other steps to ensure safe drinking water for all Americans.

Over the course of nearly a century, we allowed key parts in our drinking water delivery systems to be built with a potent neurotoxin that affects how our children learn, grow and behave. As a result, we now have a national epidemic of lead-contaminated drinking water - from urban neighborhoods to suburbs to rural America. It will take an unprecedented national commitment to undo this mistake and get the lead out of our drinking water.

Nearly 2000 water systems in all 50 states had levels of lead contamination above EPA's action level of 15 parts per billion, according to a 2016 review of testing data by USA Today.⁷ This is just the tip of the iceberg. Many communities have failed to test or test properly. More importantly, these figures do not include communities with lower concentrations of lead in their water.

And make no mistake: health experts tell us there is no safe level of lead. According to the EPA, "In children, low levels of lead exposure have been linked to damage to the central and peripheral nervous system, learning disabilities, shorter stature, impaired hearing, and impaired formation and function of blood cells."⁸ Medical experts estimate that 24 million children are at risk of losing IQ points due to low levels of lead exposure.⁹

And yes, our children are exposed to this lead-tainted water. Over the past few years, more and more schools have started to test their drinking water. And as more schools test, they are finding lead. Our review of this new testing data now shows that lead contamination of drinking water at schools is pervasive across the country - from Montana to Massachusetts, from Texas to the suburbs of Chicago.¹⁰

Chief among the investments needed to stop lead contamination of our drinking water is the full replacement of all lead service lines. These toxic pipes are the largest source of lead contamination wherever they exist; public health experts say removing them is the single most important step we can take to reduce lead contamination of drinking water.¹¹ There are roughly 9.3 million lead service lines still out there, according to EPA's most recent estimate.¹² The full cost of removing these toxic pipes likely exceeds \$45 billion.¹³

⁷ Alison Young and Mark Nichols, *Beyond Flint: Excessive lead levels found in almost 2,000 water systems across all 50 states*, USA Today, 27 March 2017 available online at

<http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2016/03/11/nearly-2000-water-systems-fail-lead-tests/81220466/>

⁸ U.S. EPA, Basic Information about Lead in Drinking Water, available online at

<https://www.epa.gov/ground-water-and-drinking-water/basic-information-about-lead-drinking-water>

⁹ American Academy of Pediatrics, *Policy Statement on Prevention of Childhood Lead Toxicity*, June 2016, available online at <https://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/early/2016/06/16/peds.2016-1493>

¹⁰ John Rumpler and Emma Dietz, *Get the Lead Out*, Environment America Research & Policy Center, March 2019 at Figure 3, available online at <https://environmentamerica.org/feature/ame/get-lead-out-0>

¹¹ Pew Charitable Trust, *10 Policies to Prevent and Respond to Childhood Lead Exposure*, August 30, 2017, available online at <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/reports/2017/08/10-policies-to-prevent-and-respond-to-childhood-lead-exposure>

¹² U.S. EPA, Exhibit 4-10 (LSL Inventory) to Lead & Copper Rule Revisions, 13 November 2019, available online at <https://www.regulations.gov/docket?D=EPA-HQ-OW-2017-0300> (9,267,910 LSLs in 2023)

Given how toxic lead is for our children, Congress should also dramatically increase federal funding to help schools and pre-schools get the lead out. The key steps are replacing lead-bearing parts wherever we can and installing certified filters. In 2018, Congress established a \$5 million pilot program to help schools replace lead-bearing water fountains. Congress should dramatically expand funding for this program.

Of course, ensuring safe drinking water for all Americans requires other investments as well - from replacing leaking pipes that waste vast quantities of clean water to safeguarding drinking water sources from toxic pollution. U.S. EPA estimates maintaining and improving the nation's drinking water infrastructure will require that \$472.6 billion over the next 20 years.¹⁴

The public overwhelmingly supports federal investment in clean water.

As Republican strategist Frank Luntz noted back in 2004 “Young and old, Democrat AND Republican, the demand for clean water is universal. More importantly, **the public is willing to pay for it.**” (emphasis in original) More recently, a 2016 Gallup poll showed that 61 percent of those polled, including 48 percent of Republicans, were worried “a great deal” about the pollution of drinking water.¹⁵ And just two years ago, Americans ranked pollution of rivers and drinking water 2nd and 3rd among their fears.¹⁶

None of this should surprise us. Polluted water can make anyone sick, regardless of race, religion, political affiliation or any of the other demographic categories that far too often are used to divide us rather than unite us.

Clean, safe water is the hallmark of an advanced society. But it is one that we have taken for granted for too long, and now America is falling short. To make good on this clean water promise we made to ourselves, we must invest as a nation to repair our water infrastructure as wisely and rapidly as possible.

Last fall, we saw bi-partisan support for increasing clean water infrastructure funding when U.S. House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure approved [H.R. 1497](#), which would more than double annual funding for the Clean Water SRF. Today, we hope the Appropriations Committee will act with even greater boldness and vision, to restore our nation's promise of clean water for all. Our children are waiting.

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¹³ See “Replacing All Lead Water Pipes Could Cost \$30 Billion,” *Water Technology*, 11 March 2016, available online at <https://www.watertechnology.com/home/article/15549954/replacing-all-lead-water-pipes-could-cost-30-billion> (AWWA estimate of \$5000 per LSL replacement x 9.3 million LSLs = \$45 billion.)

¹⁴ U.S. EPA, *6th Drinking Water Infrastructure Needs Survey and Assessment*, March 2018, available online at <https://www.epa.gov/dwsrf/epas-6th-drinking-water-infrastructure-needs-survey-and-assessment>

¹⁵ Gallup, *Americans Concerns about Water Pollution Edge Up*, 17 March 2016, available at <https://news.gallup.com/poll/190034/americans-concerns-water-pollution-edge.aspx>

¹⁶ Chapman University, *America's Top Fears 2018*, 16 October 2018, available at <https://blogs.chapman.edu/wilkinson/2018/10/16/americas-top-fears-2018/>