



Audubon Armchair Activist

Audubon's Letter of the Month Club

November 2003

Urban Stormwaters Severely Threaten Water Quality

It's something most of us never think about: what happens when rainwater washes over dirty surfaces like roads and sidewalks. All those cigarette butts, pieces of paper or plastic bags, detergents, oils and fertilizers, leaves and animal droppings that end up in our streets? What about the run-off from those few drops of spilled gasoline from filling up the car? Where does it all ultimately go? In many people's minds, it simply goes "away." In reality, however, every time it rains these polluted waters are flushed directly into our streams, rivers and beach areas, after traveling through stormwater drains.

The vast areas of paving in most urban areas for transportation cause large volumes of water with trash, fertilizer, sewage and all its associated bacteria, oil, along with metal, and heavy doses of nitrogen and phosphorus to travel rapidly toward the nearest waterway. This pollution severely impacts bird species, other wildlife and aquatic species that rely on those waters for survival - and bacteria in our drinking and recreation waters puts human health at risk too.

Thanks to enforcement of the Clean Water Act 30 years ago, our nation has done a good job limiting industrial pollution. But efforts to control pollution from roads, buildings, sidewalks and even our houses, driveways and lawns - referred to as "urban stormwaters" - are really just beginning, primarily at the local and state level. And today, 40% percent of our nation's waters remain polluted, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. But as we all well know, our state governments are facing severe budget crises, so most don't have enough funding to put towards addressing this problem, which inevitably becomes an interstate problem. Local governments and our individual pollution control practices are great, but they can only accomplish so much. That's where the U.S. Congress can step in and help! And the first step should be to dedicate a special pot of money for highway stormwater management programs.

Pending before the U.S. Senate and U.S. House of Representatives is legislation that, if enhanced, could provide needed help. It's called the Safe, Accountable, Flexible and Efficient Transportation Equity Act, or SAFETEA - bill number S.1072 in the Senate, and H.R.2088 in the House. Congress works on a transportation bill like this one every four to six years. The bill sets guidelines, rules and funding allotments for surface transportation programs, including highway and mass transit planning, construction, and repair. The last transportation bill, enacted in 1998, made some environmentally-friendly structural changes in the ways our highways are built and maintained, and even increased funding for environmental programs related thereto. For stormwater management projects, however, the 2003 proposal is much like that of previous years: it provides only an option to the states to fund stormwater-related problems caused by past transportation projects. And funding for these projects must come out of existing funds and discretionary accounts that the states generally use on other projects. With Congress slated to enact another transportation bill in 2004, our Senators and Representatives have the ability to change that!

Previous transportation bills have incorporated Clean Air Act standards and allotted funding for projects aimed at reducing air pollution along our nation's highways and roads. As stormwater runoff from highways and transportation-related activities is one of the leading causes of water pollution, the Senators on this Committee should provide a special funding source for highway stormwater management programs nationwide in this bill. It should also reward and promote community-based and ecologically sensitive practices and techniques to reduce pollution. Help encourage your two U.S. Senators and U.S. Representative to do so! Refer to the enclosed letter, or visit our TAKE ACTION site at www.audubon.org, and select the TAKE ACTION option to instantly send your letter via e-mail today!

Your Name
Address
City, State, Zip

Date

The Honorable NAME OF LAWMAKER HERE
U.S. Senate (or U.S. House of Representatives)
Washington, DC 20515 (or 20510 for House of Representatives)

Dear Senator Last Name Here: (Or Representative Last Name Here):

As a constituent concerned with conservation, I stand with the National Audubon Society in urging you to strengthen provisions for stormwater control in the Safe, Accountable, Flexible and Efficient Transportation Equity Act (SAFETEA).

Thanks to three decades of enforcement of the Clean Water Act, our nation has done a good job limiting industrial pollution. But efforts to control pollution from roads, buildings, sidewalks and even our houses, driveways and lawns - referred to as "urban stormwaters" - are really just beginning, primarily at the local and state level. And today, 40% of our nation's waters remain polluted, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. However, with state governments facing severe budget crises, most do not have enough funding to put towards addressing this problem, which inevitably becomes an interstate problem. Local governments and our individual pollution control practices are great, but they can only accomplish so much. By including provisions focused specifically on stormwater pollution in the SAFETEA bill, we as a nation can begin to address this serious threat to the quality of our water. That's why I urge you to support the Highway Storm Water Pollution Mitigation and Water Quality Improvement amendment sponsored by Senator Jim Jeffords. Among its provisions, the amendment establishes a program to provide funds to the states to reduce the flow of pollution from Federal-aid highways, enhanced groundwater recharge, and mitigation projects that assist in complying with the Clean Water Act. States can also use a small portion of the funds for other critical stormwater projects that are not associated with Federal-aid highways.

Previous transportation bills have incorporated Clean Air Act standards and allotted funding for projects aimed at reducing air pollution along our nation's highways and roads. The same must be done for water, and this amendment is a big step in that direction.

Once again I urge you to support the Highway Storm Water Pollution Mitigation and Water Quality Improvement amendment and ensure it is included in the final SAFETEA bill this year, thus help ensure safe drinking water for people, and cleaner water for birds and wildlife.

Thank you for your time and attention.

Sincerely,

Your Name