Tom Barrett
Mayor, City of Milwaukee

Testimony of Mayor Tom Barrett

Good morning, Madam Chairwoman and members of the Subcommittee on Water Resources and Environment.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before this committee and discuss Milwaukee's efforts to reduce urban stormwater runoff pollution, the largest remaining threat to water quality in our local rivers and Lake Michigan.

The Clean Water Act of 1972 resulted in unprecedented investments in wastewater infrastructure improvements across the country. The federal government led the way to cleaner water by investing more than $72 billion to help cities construct and upgrade their sewer systems and wastewater treatment facilities.

However, today urban areas face a far different threat to water quality than existed in the 1970's. In Milwaukee, for example, the latest scientific research shows that 89% of the bacteria pollution entering our major rivers and Lake Michigan comes from urban and rural runoff. Sewer overflows and wastewater treatment plants comprise the other 11%.
The science is clearly telling us that to make real progress toward achieving swimmable and fishable waterways, a more holistic water policy in the future that addresses both point and non-point pollution will be required.

According to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and other federal agencies, the nation faces a $300-500 billion water infrastructure funding gap for what needs to be spent on water related infrastructure over the next 20 years. Federal assistance has declined more than 70 percent, and now local communities shoulder more than 95 percent of the cost of clean water.

Sewer pipes in older cities leak. Fixing those leaks in the nearly 6,000 miles of sewers in the Milwaukee region is a huge financial strain on local budgets. Milwaukee has not been shirking its responsibility on stormwater. We have a stormwater fee that is based on impervious surface area. We use that funding source to help meet the backlog in sewer line repairs.

But, due to a lack of funding, our current replacement cycle for our local sewers in the City of Milwaukee is 100 years. That hard reality poses a significant threat to the great progress we've made over the years to reduce combined sewer overflows from 60 per year to an average of two each year.

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I stand with my fellow mayors in the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Cities Initiative in strong support of the effort in Congress to establish a Clean Water Trust Fund to rebuild our nation's water infrastructure. Our nation's cities need the federal government to help close the water infrastructure funding gap that has grown over the years just to prevent us from losing ground in our efforts to reduce point source pollution. At the same time, a new federal funding source is needed to construct the large-scale green infrastructure projects necessary to address polluted runoff in our cities.

To ensure that future investments result in clean water, we need to think like a watershed. We must integrate our efforts to reduce pollution from our factories and wastewater treatment plants with efforts to reduce stormwater pollution. This integration could start with the EPA helping the Milwaukee region move to a watershed permit and to help us to pilot a water quality trading system that could be model for the rest of the country.

Milwaukee has attacked polluted runoff with a variety of green infrastructure approaches, including green roofs, such as the one on the City Hall Municipal Building, rain gardens and green roofs at our public housing developments, neighborhood-wide downspout disconnection with rain barrel installation, and porous pavement.

One experience with green infrastructure in particular that I'd like to share with you was recognized with a national award from the Sierra Club and has turned out to be quite popular with the public.

We had a brownfield in the Menomonee River Valley that used to be a former rail yard and manufacturing center. It took nearly two dozen state and federal brownfield grants to clean up and redevelop this 1,200-acre space which is now home to the Harley Davidson Museum and more than a dozen other businesses. This redevelopment project has created 4,200 jobs since 1998.

When looking at the how to deal with the water that would run off the site after it was redeveloped, there were two paths to consider. One choice would have been to build a big pipe deep in the ground to collect the polluted water and send it to our treatment plants. The problem with a traditional pipes and plants approach is that the public doesn't get any direct enjoyment with this type of hidden infrastructure, as I call it. You can't hold a picnic or a tailgate party in a Deep Tunnel.

Instead, we decided to keep the water out of the sewer system by using green infrastructure on the surface of the land to capture and clean every drop of rain that falls on the business park before being slowly released to the river.

We created a beautiful stormwater park where people use the Hank Aaron Trail to bike and walk to Miller Stadium where the Milwaukee Brewers play baseball. There's easy public access to the Menomonee River where visitors can hike or fish for salmon and trout. Youth workers have planted prairies and hundreds of stormwater trees to restore habitat.

The businesses that locate there benefit financially because they can rely to a great extent on the regional stormwater system that was created, rather than bearing the cost on their own. They also benefit from the enhanced green space and aesthetics. Using green infrastructure made it possible to connect people and jobs and recreation at a formerly blighted area in the heart of Milwaukee.

I like to say that Milwaukee is located on the "Fresh Coast' because we have a huge body of fresh water right at our front door. Water will be one of the largest economic growth sectors in the world over the next decades. 1.2 billion people worldwide suffer from lack of clean water. 2.6 billion people lack adequate sanitation, primarily due to water conditions.

As Mayor, growing our water economy is central to my vision for Milwaukee. I'm not talking about selling our water. I am talking about growing and selling our technology and expertise with treating freshwater. If we can figure out how to cost effectively manage polluted runoff, our country will lead this sector of the emerging global green jobs economy.

Conclusion

Lake Michigan is a tremendous economic and recreational resource for Milwaukee. The cities around the Great Lakes don't want to backslide on water quality improvements, but that may happen unless we take action.

I'm not asking the federal government to do it all. Municipalities will continue to shoulder the vast majority of the cost of clean water. According to a study by the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Cities Initiative, local governments invest an estimated $15 billion annually to protect the Great Lakes. But that's not nearly enough to meet the escalating threats to this resource, particularly while we're experiencing ongoing cuts to federal restoration programs.

The future drive to clean water requires integrated approaches that attack all threats to the resource with sustainable financial support from federal, state, and local governments. The federal government has historically played a leading role in protecting water resources. The time has come for Congress to reestablish that role by creating a Clean Water Trust Fund to protect the water resources and economies in urban areas. Thank you.