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In My Opinion

By the Time Rainwater Reaches the Lake, It Is Human Sewage and Needs Treatment



—Journal Sketch

Richard Ashley

As resident naturalist of the Schiltz Audubon Center, I recently completed a thorough ecological study of Lake Michigan for the National Audubon Society. Based on information from that study, I feel that the separation system now under consideration by the Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewage District would do great damage to Lake Michigan, to the lake sport fishing industry, and to the drinking water quality of this most valuable resource.

For one thing, a separation system would unleash four major pollutants to both Lake Michigan and to our rivers and streams. Under the disguise of a "cheaper" system, the separation of storm runoff and sanitary waste would, in effect, allow an entire array of harmful pollutants to go directly into the lake. Salt from city streets would no longer go through Jones Island, and there is good evidence from the EPA that chlorides (from salt) are killing fish and may have to be drastically controlled in the near future. If Milwaukee had a separated system, its only option would be to stop putting salt on our city streets.

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Rain Washes Out Pollutants in Air

The cadmium from rain fallout to the city streets is one of the worst poisons we have to deal with in the watershed today. Cadmium rises from many smoke stacks as an air pollutant. The rain washes it out of the air and it falls on the streets of our city. The separation system would allow rainwater to carry the cadmium directly into the lake instead of going through treatment at Jones Island.

The reason we are told not to eat more than one meal of fish from Lake Michigan a week is because of the polychlorinated biphenyls that concentrate in the fatty portion of the fish. PCBs, as they are called, have been linked to birth defects, cancer, and many other human disorders. Any industry in Milwaukee using hydraulic fluid from the Monsanto Co. over the past fifty years has had some of that fluid leak from its machinery. PCBs were present in such fluid up to the beginning of the 1970s, and every time it rains more PCBs are carried into the lake. With a separation system there would be no treatment of rainwater and no way to stop PCBs and other toxins, now or in the future, from going directly into our lake.

Storm Water Also Needs Treatment

Every time we apply our car brakes we grind off a few asbestos fibers that fall to the highway. If we want to be sure that those cancer causing fibers have a straight route into our drinking water supply, then by all means we should support the separation system.

In short, storm water is sewage. It may have been fresh water when it drifted over Milwaukee as a cloud, but the minute it begins its descent it starts collecting the wastes of our society. By the time rain or snow hits the ground, it is human sewage and should be treated. By the time rain or melted snow sloshes around our city, it is not only sewage but has the potential to poison us. If it is allowed to flow directly into Lake Michigan we will have reached a new low in dealing with our public responsibilities.

Milwaukee's Needs Will Keep Growing

If the deep tunnel solution is too expensive or too hard to handle, then let's do something else. Directly across the lake from Milwaukee, at Muskegon, Mich., is a good example of Yankee ingenuity. Twelve local communities and a pulp and paper mill all pipe their wastewater 11 miles inland to the Muskegon County Wastewater Treatment Plant, which uses the water to grow corn and wheat. Last year $1 million worth of corn was the result.

Jones Island is expensive to operate and is no longer adequate. If Jones Island can't handle the load of storm water and sewage today, the separation system will only be temporary. Milwaukee will continue to grow and in a few years we will be right back where we started. What we need is a new system — one that might be expensive today but will also be expendable tomorrow. A provision to pump at least part of the wastewater back to the land should be part of that system.

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