

Testimony of U.S. Rep. Lori Trahan (MA-3)
Before the Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies
U.S. Capitol, H-309

Tuesday, March 10, 2020

Chairwoman McCollum, Ranking Member Joyce, members of the Committee, thank you for allowing me to testify today.

Many of the communities in your Districts are, in part, defined by their proximity to a body of water: the Mississippi River, Lake Erie, the Snake River, the Puget Sound, and so on.

These great waterways contribute to a community's identity and provide a source of civic pride and unity.

The same is true for my District; we are proud of the Merrimack River's beauty and rich history.

Fed by Lake Winnepesaukee in New Hampshire's White Mountains, the "mighty" Merrimack flows down through Concord, Manchester, and Nashua.

Then it crosses into the Commonwealth and bends east near Lowell, Massachusetts, before flowing through Lawrence and Haverhill – and out to the Atlantic.

Altogether, it runs for over 100 river miles.

I was raised in Lowell – the birthplace of America's industrial revolution. No natural feature is more tied to that city's history than the Merrimack.

The city's mill buildings – including the one where my grandmother was a worker and my Congressional office is located today – once were powered by the Merrimack.

Former Congressman and Senator Paul Tsongas alongside Senator Kennedy gifted the city a national historical national park, which was founded to preserve the industrial history which the river produced.

Just as you and your constituents love their rivers and lakes, we love the Merrimack. It's a place of commerce, recreation, and quiet reflection.

And it provides drinking water for well over half a million people.

However, the river and its watershed communities have suffered immensely over many years from repeated releases of raw sewage.

These communities are among 800 nationwide that have outdated sewer infrastructure, known as "combined sewer systems."

Combined sewer systems are named such because they collect waste from homes and businesses *as well* as stormwater.

Equally importantly, they are **designed** to channel effluent – called “C-S-Os” – into nearby bodies of water.

This happens whenever precipitation volume exceeds sewer system capacity.

Unfortunately, volume exceeds capacity all too often; and the cost to fix these systems is enormous.

Moreover, these challenges will be exacerbated by the growing effects of a warming climate.

As it stands, according to the EPA’s Clean Watersheds Needs Survey, the price tag to fix C-S-Os nationwide is \$50 billion.

In Massachusetts alone, the price tag may be a billion dollars or more.

For many years, the federal government – through the so-called “construction grants program” – supported communities’ wastewater infrastructure needs.

However, in the 1980s, these grants were largely converted to loans.

To be clear, programs like the Clean Water State Revolving Fund – or “Clean Water S-R-F” – have been invaluable for meeting C-W-A requirements.

Nevertheless, I am seated here today because, for many communities, even long-term, low-interest loans are simply beyond their means.

Grant funding is absolutely vital when the scale of wastewater infrastructure projects is so large – in the tens or hundreds of millions of dollars.

Last year, thanks to the Leadership of *this* committee, the EPA’s “Combined Sewer Overflow Control Grants” program received funding for the first time in its history.

Your investment was an excellent beginning, and I commend you for taking this step.

However, in light of the scale of the challenge before us, I respectfully request that the Committee commit to an ever greater appropriation for the CSO grant program in fiscal year 2021.

In 2018, Congress enacted *America’s Water Infrastructure Act*, which authorized \$225 million for the C-S-O grant program.

While each dollar counts, the scale of the challenge before us suggests to me that an appropriation even twice the authorized level is warranted.

I recognize that this subcommittee has a virtual “Sophie’s Choice” when it comes to funding the important priorities that protect the air we breathe, water we drink, and land we hike, hunt, and farm.

An increase in funding of the scale I recommend might impinge on other priorities.

However, I hope that you will weigh the fact that the C-S-O problem is one that has been many decades in the making; it harms communities least able to afford the necessary improvements; and we can solve it provided sufficient resources are available.

Thank you again for allowing me to testify; and I would invite you to visit the Merrimack Valley so you can enjoy the river yourself.

I yield back.