

Testimony of Amy Gomberg  
Environmental Advocate, Environment Ohio

before the

Ohio House of Representative's  
Economic Development and Environment Committee

June 20<sup>th</sup> 2007

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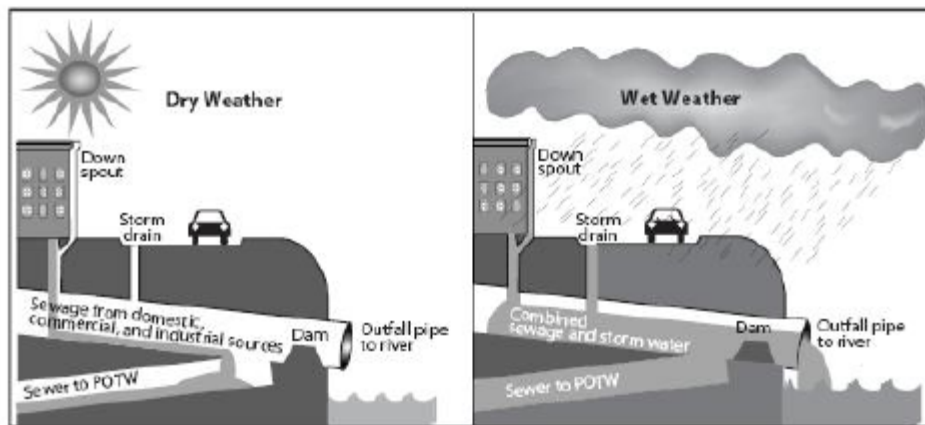
Chairman Collier, and members of the House Economic Development and Environment Committee, my name is Amy Gomberg, and I am the Environmental Advocate with Environment Ohio. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to testify in front of your committee today in regards to House Bill 235.

Environment Ohio is a statewide non profit, non partisan, environmental advocacy organization. We focus on promoting clean air, clean water, and protecting open spaces. We use our independent research to investigate environmental problems and advocate for better solutions throughout the state, region and country.

**SEWAGE OVERFLOWS IN OHIO: A SERIOUS PROBLEM**

Currently, eighty-five communities throughout Ohio use combined sewer systems. Combined sewer systems were built to manage both municipal sewage (waste from residential, commercial and industrial sources), and storm water, which flows into our sewers after it rains. A combined sewer system delivers both types of wastewater to the treatment plant simultaneously.

However, during moderate to heavy rain events or snowmelts, the combined sewer systems are inundated with rain water and sewage that often exceeds the system's treatment capacity. Combined sewer systems are built with an overflow pipe that discharges untreated sewage directly into the closest water source, such as the Olentangy River or Lake Erie. This discharge of untreated sewage is termed a combined sewer overflow or CSO.



**FIGURE 1. TYPICAL COMBINED SEWER SYSTEM**

Combined sewer systems are designed to discharge untreated sewage and storm water directly to surface water bodies such as rivers and lakes during wet weather events, causing a Combined Sewer Overflow or CSO. In dry weather the sewage is directed to the wastewater treatment plant (POTW).

Source: U.S. EPA Report to Congress: Impacts and Control of CSOs and SSOs. 2004 Chapter 2, Page 2.  
[http://www.epa.gov/npdes/pubs/csossoRTC2004\\_chapter02.pdf](http://www.epa.gov/npdes/pubs/csossoRTC2004_chapter02.pdf)

Environment Ohio recently studied sewage overflows from thirty-eight (of the fifty-two) combined sewer communities in the Lake Erie watershed basin. Compiling data from the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency (OEPA) and individual sewage utilities, the report revealed that from January – December 2005, these communities discharged more than ten billion gallons of untreated sewage into Lake Erie’s waterways.<sup>1</sup>

Ten billion gallons of sewage flowing into Lake Erie is equivalent to three billion toilets flushing into the Lake. Sewage contamination poses an environmental threat to Lake Erie and a health threat to the millions who boat, swim, and fish in it each year. The time is long overdue for keeping sewage out of our waterways.

### NEGATIVE HEALTH AND ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS

Combined sewage overflows in Ohio are a source of wildlife destruction and human health problems. Untreated sewage contains disease-causing pathogens including *E. coli*, *salmonella*, fecal coliform, enterococci, *shigella*, hepatitis virus, *cryptosporidium*, and *giardia*. These pathogens pose a risk to those who ingest contaminated water directly through inadequately treated drinking water, or indirectly, through the consumption of food that has been contaminated by affected water. The pathogens found in untreated sewage can cause serious diseases including typhoid, cholera, dysentery, and diphtheria.

<sup>1</sup> Environment Ohio, May 2007 “Sewage Overflow: Billions of Gallons of Sewage contaminate Lake Erie” pg. 11.

These diseases are particularly harmful to those with weakened immune systems, such as young children, pregnant women, and the elderly.<sup>2</sup>

Anyone who comes into contact with water that is contaminated with sewage is putting their health at risk. The Ohio Department of Health suggests that anyone who swims in Lake Erie should keep their head and face out of the water, not swallow the water, shower after swimming, and wait at least 24 hours after a heavy rainfall before swimming.<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately, Ohioans have had to deal with the negative health impacts of sewage pollution. After the May 24<sup>th</sup> article “Raw sewage dumped in lake” by Aaron Marshall of the Cleveland Plain Dealer, a reader wrote a response:

Five years ago I took my daughter to the lake and the next morning she was covered in a rash. She had taken a shower after swimming but for some reason it wasn't enough. After three trips to the emergency room, two different hospitals and six different doctors, I was referred to a doctor at Deaconess on a Saturday morning because no one knew what this rash was. It had been a week with this rash, it looked like bruises and burns and as soon as we walk in the doctor says she has a severe staff infection all over her body except her face and where her bathing suit was covering. My daughter could have died from swimming at Edgewater but she was ok after taking antibiotics. She has never been back to the lake and never will be again, so if anyone thinks it's ok water and it's not a lot of sewage remember it's not only us who dump in this water, it is polluted and has been.

## OHIOANS AND THE OHIO ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY REMAIN IN THE DARK

Unfortunately, not all sewage treatment utilities report these overflows to the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency, the Ohio Department of Health or the public when they are occurring.

While the OEPA used to require wastewater treatment plants to report sewage discharges into Ohio's waterways, the agency suspended that requirement for many years. Within the past two years the OEPA has begun to re-introduce these requirements for some communities. However, the OEPA still does not have the ability to consistently collect

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<sup>2</sup> U.S. EPA, Mid-Atlantic Water Protection: Combined Sewer Overflows & Sanitary Sewer Overflows. Last updated June 21st, 2005

[www.epa.gov/reg3wapd/cso/EnvironmentalHealth.htm](http://www.epa.gov/reg3wapd/cso/EnvironmentalHealth.htm)

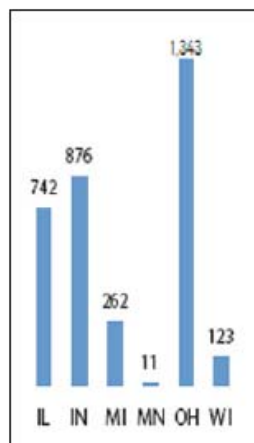
<sup>3</sup> Ohio Department of Health, South Bass Island Q & A. Feb. 22, 2005.

[www.odh.ohio.gov/ASSETS/9AD40C304B814361BF8E8417FB65A842/SBIFAQ.pdf](http://www.odh.ohio.gov/ASSETS/9AD40C304B814361BF8E8417FB65A842/SBIFAQ.pdf)

statewide sewage overflow information, because not all communities report this data on a monthly basis. This lack of reporting ties the hands of agency officials whose job it is to enforce the Clean Water Act by holding polluters accountable. Without reporting, there is no enforcement, and disregard by wastewater treatment plant owners and operators to track or notify the public of sewage discharges. Without consistent and timely tracking, monitoring or reporting of sewage overflows the public is kept in the dark about the quality of their recreational waters and drinking water sources.

### OHIO COMPARED TO OTHER STATES IN THE MIDWEST

Ohio is one of the largest contributors to our nation's sewage pollution problems with eighty-five CSO communities that dump sewage out of 1,343 CSO outfalls throughout the state. These outfalls are the actual pipe locations (point sources) where untreated sewage is released into our state's waterways.



**FIGURE 2: Distribution of CSO Outfalls in the Great Lakes Region (U.S. EPA Region V) in 2004.**

**Source:** U.S. EPA Report to Congress: Impacts and Control of CSOs and SSOs, Chapter 4 p. 15 August 2004. [www.epa.gov/npdes/pubs/csosRTC2004\\_chapter04.pdf](http://www.epa.gov/npdes/pubs/csosRTC2004_chapter04.pdf). Note: Over 30 CSO outfalls in Ohio have been eliminated since the printing of the sited report in 2004, this reduction is reflected in the above graph.

Other states in the Great Lakes Region and some cities in Ohio are doing a better job of tracking and notifying the public of sewage overflows. Michigan implemented state specific legislation that requires immediate reporting of sewage overflows. Michigan also releases an annual report, which details its statewide sewage overflows. Indiana issued an executive order that required every community with sewage overflow problems to develop a comprehensive public notification plan. The city of Indianapolis included an email notification opportunity, and within the past year the city has issued 78 email notifications to alert the public of this threat.

## SOLUTIONS

The bottom line is that eliminating sewage overflows, in all but extreme circumstances, is not a technological issue because the technological solutions are available and being implemented in communities around the country. Rather it is an issue of the drawing together the political will, citizen action, adequate funding, and creative thinking about solutions to these problems.

To eliminate sewage from entering our waterways and protect public health, the Environment Ohio recommends the following:

- 1) The state legislature should pass H.B. 235, making the reporting of any and all sewage discharges mandatory and consistent. This bill will require wastewater treatment facilities and the OEPA to notify the public in real time when these public health threats occur.
- 2) Communities need to incorporate technologies that help prevent excessive storm water from inundating our sewer systems. With more control over the storm water that enters our combined sewer systems, there will be less sewage overflowing into our waterways.
- 3) Our state and federal officials need to support more funding for sewage infrastructure improvements that strive toward the elimination of sewage overflows, such as the separation of sanitary sewer and storm sewer systems.

It is imperative that sewage treatment utilities not only work to eliminate sewage overflows, but begin to implement programs that educate and alert the public about these health threats. Currently, Ohioans are kept in the dark and are not informed when untreated sewage overflows into our waterways.

## SUPPORT FOR HOUSE BILL 235

I applaud Representative Oelslager, and co-signers Rep. McGregor, Rep. Chandler, Rep. Williams, Rep. Stebelton, Rep. Wolpert, Rep. R. Hagan of this committee, and the rest of the bi-partisan coalition of 20 legislators from across the state that have come together to introduce legislation that will protect the health of Ohioans.

This basic legislation will create a consistent, easy to follow model for utilities across the state. This bill sets the standard for public notification of sewage overflows in Ohio, and will make it easier for the OEPA to characterize our state's sewage pollution problem. This bill will hopefully help leverage further federal funding to support future projects to eliminate our sewage overflows, and create a cleaner environment. Environment Ohio, and a coalition of the following organizations fully support HB 235 in its current form, and look forward to its passage into law.

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Chairman Collier, and members of the Committee, thank you for your time this morning.  
I would be delighted to answer any questions at this time.