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Groups converge at City Hall to press for ‘fishable, swimmable’ waters in NYC

Advocates ask City Council to support aggressive actions needed to reduce sewage and stormwater pollution, promote rain gardens and other vital citywide solutions

New York, N.Y. – Clean water advocates from across the city — from Flushing Bay to the Bronx River, the Gowanus Canal and Staten Island — converged on City Hall Wednesday urging City Council to reduce chronic pollution flowing into New York’s waters and aggressively promote rain gardens and other forms of green infrastructure.

Despite past progress, New York City has the worst level of sewage pollution of any city in the country. Even small amounts of rain trigger raw sewage overflows that pose community health risks and decimate marine ecosystems. Under the Clean Water Act, the State of New York oversees NYC’s management of this immense volume of sewage and stormwater pollution, and required - in 2005 - that the City create “Long Term Control Plans” detailing the city’s proposed methods to address these problems citywide and in ten specific waterways around the Harbor. The city’s plans to address these problems are woefully inadequate — effectively locking in the *status quo* for decades.

Specifically:

- The city’s “Long Term Control Plans” will not make our waterways safe for recreational activities and will pose new threats to marine ecosystems and wildlife. In each waterbody, the respective plans will leave hundreds of millions of gallons (for some waterways, over a billion gallons) of sewage entering each waterbody annually. In many places, the plans would allow overflow events to dozens of times per year. And the plans all fail to meet modern water quality standards, which the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency developed to protect public health.
- Capture, don’t chlorinate. Under plans proposed by the city and approved by New York State, the city intends to dump chlorine into the sewers near Alley Creek and Flushing Creek in Queens as well as the Hutchinson River in the Bronx. These plans rely on unproven methods for this treatment, which will not make our waterways safe for recreation and will add a new toxic chemical to vulnerable habitats.
- New York needs to go all-in on green infrastructure, in combination with major investments in traditional “gray” infrastructure. The city has [failed to meet](#) its first major deadline under a state-mandated Green Infrastructure Plan and lacks a strategy to get back on track for future deadlines. A more robust green infrastructure program — including adaptable designs for public property, stronger requirements for new development, and real incentives for private property owners — is needed now.

- New York needs more equitable ways to pay for clean water investments. The City should join over 1,500 U.S. cities that charge customers for stormwater services based on how much runoff a property puts into the sewers — not based on how much drinking water a property owner uses. A fair rate structure would promote affordable housing and support needed clean water investments.

- More transparency and public input is urgently needed. The New York City Department of Environmental Protection and state Department of Environmental Conservation have led a secretive process, and much of the public is not being informed about development of the LTCPs, or given real opportunities to weigh in on these far-reaching plans before they are approved. Even the most basic information about risks to water users — when sewage overflows are occurring — is not being communicated.

“In our nation’s largest city, it’s unacceptable that sewage overflows foul local waterways up to 100 times per year. Those events make our waters unsafe for 8 million New Yorkers to swim, boat or fish in,” said [Larry Levine](#), a senior attorney with the **Natural Resources Defense Council’s water program**. “New York needs to invest in 21st century infrastructure for a cleaner, healthier future. Decisions the Mayor and City Council make now will set the course for this generation of New Yorkers and the one that follows.”

“Save the Sound urges New York City to take an integrated approach to wastewater treatment and consider the detrimental impact that chlorine has on marine life and aquatic ecosystems,” said **Tracy Brown, director of Save the Sound**. “Long Island Sound is home to city beaches and living shorelines which benefit New Yorkers with recreation, economic activity and storm surge protection. Plans for these scarce and vulnerable ecosystems should not include the introduction of another toxin, chlorine.”

“New York City has the worst level of sewage pollution in the country, with over 20 billion gallons of pollution discharging from City sewers each year — into the harbor, our creeks and canals, and major tributaries that course through all five boroughs,” said **Sean Dixon, senior attorney at Riverkeeper**. “This staggering pollution problem has adverse health consequences for the boaters and swimmers in our waterways, adverse ecological impacts to our rivers and growing oyster restoration efforts, and adverse economic impacts as 520 miles of city waterfronts become unusable (during, and for a few days after) rainstorms. We must insist that the city invest in plans that capture more sewage, require more green infrastructure, and get started with construction today, not in ten years.”

“New Yorkers are returning to our waterways, where centuries ago we swam for fun and we fished for food,” said **Roland Lewis, President & CEO of Waterfront Alliance**. “We’re on our way back, but we still have a long way to go to meet the ‘fishable and swimmable’ standards set by the Clean Water Act. Most of us still don’t know that roughly 20 billion gallons of raw sewage flow into our waterways every year, as our centuries-old sewer system overflows when it rains. We call on the administration and the Council to ensure that the investments we make today will lead to healthier, safer waterways tomorrow.”

“Clean waterways are an important issue for many New Yorkers in this coastal city,” said **Julie Welch, Program Manager for SWIM Coalition**. “Waterbodies around the City provide citizens from every borough with a much needed physical and emotional relief from the harsh environs of the most urbanized city in the nation. The Stormwater Infrastructure Matters (SWIM)

Coalition, a citywide group of 70-plus waterway stakeholders, is deeply concerned that the City and State are not doing enough to ensure fishable, swimmable waters in many of our local waterways.”

Background

New York City is developing a series of Long Term Control Plans (LTCPs) to address the 20 billion gallons of combined sewer overflows that plague the waterways, posing health risks and depleting marine life. When it has not rained recently, water quality is generally safe for recreation. But after even a small rain event, sewage overflows makes the city’s waterways too foul to touch.

To manage this immense volume of sewage and stormwater pollution, under the Clean Water Act, the State of New York requires NYC to create “Long Term Control Plans” detailing the city’s proposed methods to address these problems in specific waterways. The city’s 11 Long Term Control Plans decide the future of New York City’s waterways for decades to come.

Seven of the 11 plans have recently been approved by New York State without public participation. Two more are under state review. Many of the plans include no new investments for clean water. Others propose dumping toxic chlorine into the sewers, merely divert sewage from one place to another, or defer investments for decades.

The New York City Council scheduled an oversight hearing on these plans to ask the city’s Department of Environmental Protection to defend its decisions and provide an opportunity for public input.

Organizations across New York City are mobilizing for stronger actions through the SWIM Coalition, online at SwimmableNYC.org.

More information

[Facts on sewage overflow control plans for each waterbody](#)
[General Information about combined sewer overflows and Long Term Control Plans](#)
[NYC Combined Sewer Overflows Update](#)
[Open Sewer Atlas](#)

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About the Natural Resources Defense Council

The Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) is an international nonprofit environmental organization with more than 3 million members and online activists. Since 1970, our lawyers, scientists, and other environmental specialists have worked to protect the world’s natural resources, public health, and the environment. NRDC has offices in New York City, Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago, Bozeman, MT, and Beijing. Visit us at www.nrdc.org and follow us on Twitter [@NRDC](https://twitter.com/NRDC).

About Save the Sound

Save the Sound is a bi-state program of the Connecticut Fund for the Environment with an established 45-year track record of restoring and protecting the waters and shorelines of the Long Island Sound. From its offices in Mamaroneck, NY and New Haven, CT, Save the Sound works for a cleaner, healthier,

and more vibrant Long Island Sound where humans and marine life can prosper year-round. Learn more at www.savethesound.org.

About Riverkeeper

Riverkeeper is a member-supported watchdog organization dedicated to defending the Hudson River and its tributaries and protecting the drinking water supply of nine million New York City and Hudson Valley residents. Riverkeeper has helped to establish globally recognized standards for waterway and watershed protection and serves as the model and mentor for the growing Waterkeeper movement that includes more than 300 Keeper programs across the country and around the globe. Visit us at www.riverkeeper.org and follow us on Twitter [@Riverkeeper](https://twitter.com/Riverkeeper).