



Save the Sound®

Action for our region's environment.

February 2, 2024

As the Vice President of Water Protection for Save the Sound, an environmental action organization working to protect and restore the Long Island Sound region, my work is focused on addressing the three mounting challenges that threaten clean water across New York State.

The first is wastewater pollution, resulting from aging and deteriorating infrastructure. In Westchester County, where Save the Sound's New York headquarters and water quality lab are located, we deal with cracked and broken sanitary sewer lines, which carry not just the water that goes down our toilets but water from our showers, sinks, dishwashers, and washing machines into those pipes. Untreated sewage can escape from leaky pipes even in dry weather. In our 2023 Long Island Sound Beach Report, we noted that water samples collected at beaches in Westchester County between 2020-2022 failed 5.7% of the time in dry conditions. That means wastewater pollution can make the rivers and creeks that run through our communities unsafe and require beaches to close even on days when it's not raining. On Long Island, the infrastructure challenges include the 380,000 inadequate and undermaintained septic and cesspool systems, which leads to nitrogen polluting the groundwater, bays and harbors, and Long Island Sound.

The second challenge is stormwater pollution. Storms are increasing in frequency and severity, but it doesn't take a deluge to degrade water quality. It's the first inch-and-a-half of rain that carries the most concentrated slug of pollutants—pesticides and fertilizer from residential lawns; fuel, oil, grease, and tire debris from our driveways, streets, and parking lots; pet waste left behind in parks and on sidewalks, or waste from animals that make their homes in catch basins and stormwater pipes—into our waterways. Rain hits impervious surfaces from roofs to roadways and the runoff sweeps these contaminants into our rivers, creeks, bays, and harbors.

The third challenge we all face is climate change, a triple-threat unto itself because of its compounding impact on the other challenges.

The consequences of climate change exacerbate wastewater pollution, as increased rainfall infiltrates and overwhelms those cracked sanitary sewer pipes and faulty septic systems, causing raw or partially treated sewage to be discharged into our waterways and adding to the nitrogen pollution problem that has plagued Long Island Sound for decades. Weather made worse by climate change poses a particular challenge to New York City, where combined sewer systems carry wastewater and stormwater in the same pipes to wastewater treatment plants, where they are treated together. During these intensifying storms, the increased volume of stormwater combined with wastewater from densely populated communities is greater than the capacity of the system's pipes or the plants to treat. Excess untreated wastewater and stormwater winds up being discharged directly into nearby waterways, which degrades water quality and creates an immediate public health concern for anyone who might be interacting with that polluted water. And we know that disadvantaged communities are disproportionately affected by these polluting events.

Climate change also compounds stormwater pollution, which we are reminded every time we see reports of new rainfall records, as likely to occur during unnamed storms than the named hurricanes and tropical storms that reach our region. Our infrastructure simply cannot handle the amount of rain we are getting.



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We are coming off the warmest year in New York City since data was first recorded back in 1869. This is not an anomaly. Each of the last four years ranks among the 20 hottest years New York City has ever experienced. As the Governor said in her briefing book, “A rapidly warming climate has put coastal states like New York on the front lines of climate change.”

Life on the front lines of climate change is dangerous and costly. Last week, Governor Hochul announced that President Biden approved her request for a Major Disaster Declaration, which will provide federal assistance to support downstate communities – including Westchester County and Nassau County in the Long Island Sound region – in their recovery from devastating floods back in September. People and property in coastal communities are threatened by sea level rise and erosion, and local municipal budgets cannot meet the ravages of climate change.

Communities across the state share these challenges. And yet the Governor, in her executive budget, proposed cutting funding for the Clean Water Infrastructure Act. Instead of investing \$500 million – the amount it has received annually since 2019 – in FY 2025, the proposal would spread \$500 million across two years.

Cutting such critical funding in half is unacceptable. There are billions of dollars’ worth of clean water infrastructure projects to be done in any one of the counties that surround Long Island Sound. The cost of repairing and upgrading New York State’s inadequate wastewater and drinking water infrastructure has been estimated at \$80 billion over 20 years. Which is why Save the Sound and our partners in the New York State Clean Water Coalition are calling for \$600 million to be budgeted for the Clean Water Infrastructure Act in FY 2025.

This is not the time to scale back our investment in a vital, successful program that funds local clean water projects that upgrade sewage treatment facilities, mitigate the growing threat of PFAS, and protect the pipes that feed drinking water into our homes. Governor Hochul’s proposal would be a major step backward at a time when we can least afford one.

We must make investments that match the moment. Scaling back not only slows our progress in addressing our failing infrastructure, it weakens our position to leverage the once-in-a-lifetime levels of available federal funding necessary to ensure municipalities can afford to take on these expensive but essential overhauls. Every year we wait, those old systems just get older, and those sources of pollution keep polluting waterways from the North Fork to the North Country to the Niagara River.

The opportunity cost, both in environmental and economic terms, would be enormous.

We ask that the Legislature’s one-house budget include \$600 million for the Clean Water Infrastructure Act, plus a long-term commitment to the CWIA of at least \$4 billion over the next five years.

Additionally, we encourage the Legislature to make the following investments to protect the health of our environment, our natural resources, and the security of communities across New York State:

- \$400 million for the Environmental Protection Fund, a rejection of the proposed \$25 million offload, and the restoration of EPF programs that would otherwise be reduced;
- \$250 million in annual capital funding for state parks, in addition to funding for centennial projects;



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- Continued transparent implementation of the \$4.2 billion Environmental Bond Act; and
- \$96,323 to the Interstate Environmental Commission, which monitors water quality in Long Island Sound.

Clean water is a fundamental right and a necessity for the public health and safety of all New Yorkers.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

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