

Report faults Detroit for sewers

City ranked worst in Great Lakes region

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The billions of gallons of untreated sewage and industrial waste that spew out of metro Detroit's aging sewer system are increasingly endangering drinking water, damaging ecosystems and causing record beach closures, according to a study released Monday by a coalition of environmental groups.

Since 2009, the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department dumped 34 billion gallons of untreated sewage and dirty storm water into the Detroit and Rouge rivers, more than any city in the eight-state Great Lakes region, according to the report's author, Healing Our Waters-Great Lakes Coalition, an alliance of more than 100 environmental groups.

Discharges happen when heavy rains overwhelm the sewage system, polluting waterways with a toxic cocktail of rainwater, fertilizers, chemicals, parasites and human and industrial waste. Detroit's sprawling system is so overwhelmed that it dumps sewage even during light rain.

"Detroit is on the front lines of a sewage crisis," Melissa Damaschke, organizer of Sierra Club's Great Lakes Program, said Monday.

Fixing the problem in Michigan,

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however, will cost cashstrapped governments about \$7 billion, the report estimates. The solution? The federal government should pick up much of the funding, the report states.

"Congress has (a) historic opportunity to provide a shot in the arm to local communities," Detroit City Councilwoman Jo Ann Watson said. "Failure to act will make the problems worse and the solutions more costly."

Detroit scrapped a \$1.2-billion project last year to build a 7-mile-long Upper Rouge Tunnel to store excess storm water, saying it was too expensive.

Detroit has spent more than \$1.5 billion in the past two decades on sewer upgrades, according to the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department.

One of the biggest threats of untreated sewage is E. coli, bacteria that can cause severe cramps, nausea and diarrhea.

"The people of Detroit are ready to move forward and put an end to beach closings and public health advisories," said Andy Buchsbaum, co-chair of the coalition and regional executive director for the National Wildlife Federation's Great Lakes office. "We have solutions to stem the tide of sewage pollution. It's time we use them."