

(July 5, 2006) Bill to stop lake sewage

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Two area congressmen are calling for new federal legislation to end the dumping of sewage into Lake Michigan, which they say is polluting the region's water supply and contributing to beach closings.

During a press conference in Chicago June 26, U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, R-10th, of Highland Park, and U.S. Rep. Dan Lipinski, D-3rd, of Chicago, unveiled the proposed Great Lakes Water Protection Act, which establishes a federal deadline of 2026 to end sewage dumping into the Great Lakes.

"We drink from this source and our children swim along the shores of Lake Michigan. We must put a stop to the poisoning of our water supply," said Kirk, in a statement released Monday.

"The Great Lakes are critical to our lives and our economy," said Lipinski. "We cannot sit idly by and watch this precious resource be destroyed by the dumping of raw sewage."

While some communities such as Chicago have improved their infrastructure to prevent dumping of partially treated sewage into Lake Michigan, other cities have been slow to upgrade their sewer infrastructure and continue to pollute the lake, the lawmakers say.

In May 2004, the Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District dumped 1.5 billion gallons of sewage into the lake, Kirk said. Other communities that also dump into Lake Michigan include East Chicago, Gary and Michigan City, Ind., and Benton Harbor, South Haven, Holland and Grand Haven, Mich., according to a press release from Kirk's office.

Kirk and Lipinski's legislation gives cities until 2026 to build the full infrastructure needed to prevent sewage dumping into the Great Lakes. After the deadline, those who violate the dumping regulations will be fined \$100,000 for every day they are in violation. Currently, the law provides for fines of \$25,000 a day for dumping of sewage over U.S. EPA prescribed limits. The legislation also would create a fund that would be used to help clean up water and beaches in areas where violations have occurred.

Kirk believes the dumping of sewage into Lake Michigan has caused an increase in the number of beach closings in recent years.

"In fact, Cook County beach closings alone increased from 213 in 2003 to 613 in 2004," said Kirk, noting that in 2004 there were 150 beach closings in the 10th Congressional District alone.

According to the Natural Resources Defense Council, Waukegan had 38 daily beach closings that year, Winnetka 36, Wilmette, 22, Highland Park 21, Great Lakes 15, Lake Forest 12 and Lake Bluff 6. All the closings were bacteria related and no proven source was identified.

"While we don't have scientific evidence (as to the cause), common sense should tell us that the dumping of large amounts of sewage into the lake is not good," Kirk said.

Wilmette Village President Chris Canning who attended the press conference, said residents in his community are concerned whenever beach closures occur and he believes the legislation is "one step in ending the problem."

"On a hot summer day, when residents find out that they can't go to the beach because (of high bacteria levels in the water), they are often very upset," he said.

Lake County Board Member Ann Maine, R-21th, of Lincolnshire, said Lake County also has many public beaches along the North Shore and a state park along Lake Michigan.

Maine said while other factors also contribute to pollution in the lake including seagull droppings, she supports legislation to stop the dumping of sewage.

"I think there are a lot of different sources of pollution in the lakes so any step we can take is really important," she said.

Others who attended the press conference to voice support for stronger sewage regulations were Cameron Davis from the Alliance of the Great Lakes, Jack Derrin with the Illinois Chapter of the Sierra Club, Steve Bartram of Lake Forest Open Lands, John Anderson of the Nature Conservancy, Debra Shore of the Chicago Wilderness Society and Steve Drew of the North Shore Sanitary District.