



Testimony in support of
H.751/S.490 An Act promoting awareness of sewage pollution in public waters
Submitted to the Joint Committee on Environment, Natural Resources and Agriculture
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April 2, 2019

Massachusetts has some of the oldest water and sewage systems in the country. In many of our cities, the storm water and sewage wastewater systems merge, and in times of heavy rains this results in Combined Sewage Overflows (CSOs), often with millions of gallons of bacteria-laden raw sewage entering a river from a single event. These discharges go into rivers when the stormwater overwhelms the combined system, and were “designed” to prevent sewage backups into homes or onto the streets. Eighteen major rivers and their tributaries in Massachusetts are affected. These systems are all outdated, but replacement, while mandated, will take billions of dollars and possibly decades to fully implement.

Until the combined systems are fully replaced with separate stormwater and sewage systems, we need a proper notification system. These bills would require that CSO operators notify local health officials of any discharge within two hours, and that those officials immediately send an email or text to anyone who signed up to receive notification. The message would describe the location of the event, the estimated volume discharged, and any health recommendations, like not boating or fishing in the water for 72 hours.

While 14 other states have mandatory notification systems for CSOs, currently there is no Massachusetts-mandated timely notification when the river water is dangerously contaminated. In Massachusetts, sewer operators are required to report CSO events to state and federal agencies, but are not required to inform the public. These bills would require cities to place signs near outfall locations and popular recreational spots whenever there’s an overflow, and that the state collect more CSO information and make it publicly accessible online.

Today some sewage systems have detectors, but others do not. There is an expense involved in either adding detection systems or sending a person into the field to inspect the system when a CSO is suspected. While municipal water operators would like to avoid these expenditures, it’s past time for the public to know in near real time when the water they are considering using for recreation or agriculture is contaminated with raw sewage. The 2018 Environmental Bond Bill actually earmarked \$800,000 in grants to help cities comply with this type of regulation.

The LWVMA, representing 47 local Leagues from Cape Cod to the Berkshires, believes it should be a basic human right to have clean water and to know when water is unsafe. Since 1983, the League of Women Voters of Massachusetts has supported means to protect our critical water resources and to repair and rehabilitate water systems. That is exactly what these two bills do. The LWVUS position on Natural Resources states that: Pollution of these resources should be controlled in order to preserve the physical, chemical and biological integrity of ecosystems and to protect public health. At the state level, the LWVMA supported the Waste Management Act of 1985, which established that surface and ground waters all are

part of one system that needs to be safeguarded. For all these reasons, the LWVMA supports this bill and asks that you favorably report this bill out of committee. Thank you for your consideration.