



## 2024 FACT SHEET: SFPUC SEWAGE SYSTEM ISSUES

### SFPUC's SYSTEM FAILS DURING HEAVY STORMS

- San Francisco's combined sewage and stormwater system is unique among the Bay Area's cities. Wastewater combines with stormwater that drains off city streets, and both typically receive treatment before being discharged into the Bay.
- When San Francisco's combined system is working as intended, it's good at removing bacteria and pollution.
- However, when there are heavy rains, the system fails. On average, this happens more than a dozen times a year.
- Millions of gallons of untreated sewage end up in the Bay. Baykeeper scientists and SF residents have documented evidence of raw sewage in Mission Creek and other areas.

### WATER QUALITY AND PUBLIC HEALTH ARE SIGNIFICANTLY AFFECTED

- The Clean Water Act sets legal limits for bacteria levels in the water at 110 parts of bacteria per 100 ml water. Usually, San Francisco's water is exemplary, at about 10 units per 100 ml.
- However, during big storms when the system is failing, SFPUC regularly reports seeing 5,000 units of bacteria—even 40,000 units—per 100 ml in the Bay.
- The bacteria and pollution in SF's discharges can linger for days, causing Baykeeper and local authorities to issue advisories warning against swimming and other water contact recreation near the shoreline.
- When people are exposed to the viruses, bacteria, and other toxic components that can be found in untreated wastewater, they can experience serious health problems, including rashes, infections, and stomach issues.
- During big storms, when the system is overwhelmed, SFPUC also discharges large amounts of trash, including single-use plastics, syringes, and condoms, into the Bay. This can harm fish and wildlife, and ruin SF's beautiful shoreline views.



November 2022 to March 2023: This chart depicts the results of SF's Mission Creek bacteria water quality monitoring (brown vertical bars, log-scale) as compared to the legal water quality limit (red horizontal line), and the magnitude and dates of SF's sewage discharges (size-dependent purple circles—the larger the circle, the greater the discharge volume).

## CONTINUING TO DELAY REPAIRS ISN'T THE ANSWER

- SFPUC claims that it's too expensive to fix the problem, and that the necessary upgrades wouldn't make a difference in terms of water quality. According to available public information, both assertions are false.
- The cost of fixing the system will only get more expensive the longer SF waits—adding to 30 years of deferred maintenance isn't a solution.



*[Photo: SFPUC Division Gate discharges into Mission Creek.]*

- In 2018, SFPUC estimated a total cost of roughly \$1.5bn to reduce polluted discharges into Mission and Islais Creeks from 11 times a year to just 2 per year, and from 950 million gallons to 52 million gallons [SFPUC 2018 Sensitive Areas Report, pg. 27 Table 5].
- In 2024, SFPUC released new estimates for various projects to reduce polluted discharges from its entire system (not just those into Mission and Islais Creeks) as \$10.7bn. This analysis is flawed and relies on a list of questionable infrastructure projects. However, even SFPUC itself concludes that the cost is “not likely to be substantial.” [2024 Economic and Social Impact Assessment, Attachment B, pgs. 9-11, Table 2-5].
- Upgrading the system now will make SF's infrastructure more resilient to the effects of climate change, allow the city to accommodate an increased population, replace infrastructure that already is (or will soon be) beyond its useful life, and have the added benefit of reducing nitrogen and phosphorus, which causes algae blooms in the Bay.

## THE CITY SHOULD ABANDON ITS MISGUIDED CHALLENGE TO THE CLEAN WATER ACT

- If the Supreme Court sides with San Francisco, the ruling could undermine the Clean Water Act's ability to address complex water pollution issues.
- This weakening of the Clean Water Act would remove an important regulatory tool to prevent violations of water quality standards and lead to increased water pollution.
- Continuing to pursue litigation against the EPA will cause SF's environmental reputation and water quality to decline, while public exposure to pollution and the costs to solve the problem will both increase.

## IT'S NOT TOO LATE FOR SFPUC TO DO RIGHT BY ITS RESIDENTS AND PREPARE FOR THE FUTURE

- If SFPUC stops denying it has a problem and accepts the fact that it needs to act now to solve the issues, it can be eligible for significant federal and state infrastructure funding to prevent burdening SF residents with the entire cost. The city can also structure any necessary rate increases in a way that protects low-income residents.
- SF must face the facts and take responsibility for the problem. The city should stop using taxpayer dollars on its costly legal fight to undermine the Clean Water Act and instead use those funds to improve aging, inadequate, and ultimately harmful infrastructure.
- By working together, we can identify potential state and federal funding mechanisms and come up with a plan to fix SF's pollution problems and ease the burden on ratepayers. We're all in this together, and we all benefit from a healthy Bay Area. 🌊