

## Why Our Sewers Overflow When It Rains

**Every year, more than 850 billion gallons of untreated sewage flows into our nation's rivers, lakes and bays. These sewage overflows come from "combined" sewer systems built as many as 100 years ago in many U.S. cities.**

South Bend, Mishawaka, Elkhart and many other cities built storm sewers in the early 1900s to carry rainwater and melting snow away from homes, businesses and streets. In those horse-and-buggy days, these cities didn't have sewage treatment or even indoor plumbing.

When indoor plumbing came later, homeowners and business owners hooked their sewage lines to the existing storm sewers, combining storm water and raw sewage into one pipe. The pipes emptied directly into the river, until the 1950s when sewage treatment plants were built.

This was common practice in many U.S. cities, especially in the Northeast and Midwest.

During dry weather, a "combined" sewer system works much like a separate sewer — carrying all sewage to the treatment plant for treatment.

However, when it rains or snow melts, the sewers can be overloaded with incoming stormwater. When this happens, the sewers are designed to flow over internal dams in the underground pipes and into nearby streams and rivers. If they didn't have this release valve, raw sewage would back up into people's basements and streets.

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*During dry weather, all sewage is carried to the treatment plant.*

Today, when building new sewer systems, we build separate sewers for stormwater and sewage. Yet these older "combined" sewers remain along the St. Joseph River and in many older cities throughout the country.

Raw sewage overflowing into the St. Joseph River threatens an important community resource and is hazardous to people's health. Millions of gallons of untreated sewage and rainwater enter the river each year.

The communities along the river have already invested more than \$200 million to reduce these overflows. State and federal regulators will require even more overflow reduction in the future. We need your involvement as the communities seek public input into the best long-term plans to protect the river and those using it.