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We Need Real Solutions to N.J. Water Woes

By Chris Sturm
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Few things are better than spending a day at the Jersey Shore. However, this summer the region that in 2017 contributed half of the state's $44 billion in tourism revenue has been plagued by debris washups, high bacteria counts that caused swimming bans and advisories, and even repeated beach closures. These are not new phenomena; similar reports date back to the 1980s, when water quality monitoring and testing began. As a result, businesses and communities that depend on clean, safe beaches have been cheated of would-be visitors and income.

What is the cause of all of this? According to one report, the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection says the likely source of the materials in the trash washups are antiquated combined sewer systems in northern New Jersey and New York City that have been overwhelmed by heavy rain. As for the high level of fecal bacteria, the DEP cites local stormwater runoff as a likely cause.

Combined sewer systems are an engineering design dating back to the 1800s and early 1900s. They take in wastewater from homes and businesses as well as water from rainstorms. When too much rainwater flows into the combined sewer pipes and mixes with the wastewater, it can overwhelm the sewer system's capacity, forcing it to discharge untreated waste into rivers, streams, and bays. This is called a combined sewer overflow, or CSO, and that combined flow can include debris such as syringes and litter. Currently 21 New Jersey communities operate combined sewer systems.

However, the CSO systems are not the only culprits closing beaches and fouling the water. The recent heavy rains generated large volumes of runoff that picked up pollution as it flowed over roads, parking lots and other surfaces, and into local waterways. This includes animal waste, trash, pesticides and any substance or small items left on the ground. This polluted runoff can carry high amounts of fecal coliform bacteria, which can be detrimental to human health. When found in abundance, its presence can result in beach closures.

The economic importance of the Shore is undeniable, and it is in our best interest to protect New Jersey's beaches and water that make it special. Failure to address CSOs and runoff will lead to more trash and contaminants on our beaches, more closures and bans, closed shellfish beds and fish kills like a recent one in Queens, and less income for Shore-based businesses. With only 140 miles of Atlantic coastline, the loss of any beach access is a serious matter in a state of more than 9 million residents.

Meanwhile, closing beaches does not address the underlying problem. All New Jerseyans should support real solutions, including updating state and local regulations to encourage innovative, nature-based solutions for reducing polluted runoff, and prioritizing long-overdue investments in dysfunctional sewer and stormwater infrastructure. Residents and businesses should participate actively in shaping these water investments so they address community needs. This fall the Legislature should authorize stormwater utilities, a tool used in 40 other states to generate sustainable revenues for these upgrades. Individuals, state and local governments, businesses and private property owners all must play a role in advancing these solutions. The statewide Jersey Water Works collaborative is actively working to facilitate the engagement of the full spectrum of stakeholders in finding and implementing these solutions.

Let's start viewing CSOs and polluted runoff as the economic threats they are, and work together on developing holistic and innovative solutions that will safeguard our economic prosperity.

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