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WSSC is Breaking the Law and Jeopardizing Our Health

Statement By Nancy Stoner, director, Clean Water Project, Natural Resources Defense Council

Good morning. I'm Nancy Stoner, the director of NRDC's Clean Water Project. Along with our co-plaintiffs, the Anacostia Watershed Society, Audubon Naturalist Society and Friends of Sligo Creek, NRDC today is announcing that we are going to sue the Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission for illegally discharging millions of gallons of raw sewage into Maryland waterways.

There has been a lot of media attention lately on bureaucratic dysfunction at WSSC, but the bigger problem is this: WSSC is failing to do its job to protect the health of area residents. So far this year WSSC's dilapidated sewer system has dumped more than 4 million gallons of raw sewage into Maryland waterways. By the agency's own account, there have been 79 sewage discharges between January and the end of June. Given that WSSC has no comprehensive monitoring system, there likely were a lot more. This is inexcusable – and illegal.

We are filing suit to force WSSC to stop these sewer overflows by implementing a plan to overhaul its 50-year-old system. It has to start monitoring for spills and leaks. And it has to include the public in its planning process to upgrade its system.

This is not a problem unique to WSSC. WSSC is a typical example of sewer authorities across the country. Nationally, 23,000 to 75,000 sanitary sewer discharges occur every year. The result is 3 billion to 10 billion gallons of raw sewage in our waterways. We use those waterways for fishing, swimming and boating – and sewage is making too many Americans sick.

It's the job of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to take action against sewer operators. But under this administration, the cop is off the beat. In fact, when this administration took office it shelved a proposed EPA rule that would have required sewer agencies to reduce overflows and warn the public of the risk when overflows occur. For this administration, and for too many sewer agencies, discharging raw sewage into local streams, schoolyards and basements is business as usual, regardless of the consequences for public health.

The residents of Washington and its Maryland suburbs don't want human waste in our streams and rivers, let alone in our basements. WSSC has an annual budget of \$466 million dollars. For that kind of money, we should be finding gold in our rivers, not sewage.

The Natural Resources Defense Council is a national, non-profit organization of scientists, lawyers and environmental specialists dedicated to protecting public health and the environment. Founded in 1970, NRDC has more than 1 million e-activists and members, served from offices in New York, Washington, Santa Monica and San Francisco. More information is available at NRDC's Web site, <http://www.nrdc.org/>.

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