

# Cape decries plan to cut federal aid

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**BARNSTABLE** - Proposals by the Bush administration to cut sewer funding and reduce treatment requirements fly in the face of efforts here to protect already threatened water quality, according to a national environmental report and local officials.

The changes could, among other things, make it more difficult and expensive to create a Cape-wide wastewater management entity to oversee sewage treatment options, a proposal now being considered by Cape business leaders, environmentalists and Barnstable County government representatives.

The Bush administration's proposals would ease standards for sewage treatment by making greater allowances for stormwater runoff that's combined with treated sewage.

Also, federal funds earmarked for wastewater treatment plant and infrastructure construction would be dramatically reduced by almost a third, from \$1.34 billion

this year to \$850 million in the fiscal year 2005 budget, a drop of almost \$500 million.

All of these proposed cuts or changes in discharge standards remain pending.

In a new report, "Swimming in Sewage," the National Resources Defense Council takes the Bush administration to task for its proposals.

"The reason why we oppose them is they are substituting dilution for treatment, and are masking the problem," said Nancy Stoner, who worked on the report for the NRDC.

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Among other things, the NRDC notes that with expanding populations comes more sewage discharges. With cutbacks on sewage treatment, more people could be exposed to health threats if that sewage seeps into groundwater or into the ocean, especially along beachfronts.

The report also notes that with global warming now on just about everyone's radar screen, the potential for more, and heavier, rainstorms will only exacerbate the problem.

Heavy runoff from such storms could pass through on-site septic systems carrying waste through the aquifer and into ponds and the ocean.

Cape residents and businesses rely predominantly on on-site septic systems.

Ninety percent of the 147,000 homes here have such systems.

And each one has its own "little plume" of pollution, mostly nitrogen, moving into groundwater or heading toward coastal embayments, where it can degrade water quality.

Once in the water, nitrogen can act like a fertilizer, leading to massive blooms of algae that can choke off other aquatic plant and animal life.

Without federal help, any program will likely lean on Cape residents to foot a major part of what could be a huge cost for a Cape-wide wastewater management system, with rough estimates ranging from \$1 billion to \$3 billion over the next 30 to 40 years.

"It will mean users will pay a higher percentage of cost for this kind of infrastructure, and we'd lose the ability for upfront money to do some planning," said Tom Cambareri, the staff hydrologist with the Cape Cod Commission.

"The problems will only get worse. The costs will only get higher," warned Maggie Geist, executive director of the Association to Preserve Cape Cod.

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