
ACTION ALERT

for Clean Water and Healthy Fish



The Chicago River and its sister waterways afford a regional advantage to the people, plants and animals that live in and along them. The complex system of rivers and canals provides thousands of acres of habitat for a diverse wildlife population that ranges from black-crowned night herons to beavers to bass. It provides recreational opportunities such as paddling, fishing, birding, biking, hiking, or crew to thousands of individuals, families, school teams, and river-edge neighbors. And finally, these rivers and streams provide a commercial boost to the region through shipping, tourism, and an ever-increasing waterfront property tax base.

It Started with a Choice

Because of the legacy of pollution that haunts them, these waterways including the Chicago River with its Main Stem, North Branch, and South Branch, the North Shore Channel, the Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal and the Calumet River system haven't been treasured and cared for like Lake Michigan, and the outdated standards that govern them reflect that. In fact, in the early days of Chicago, to save the lake, we chose to pollute the river and treated Chicago's inland waterway system like an alley, dumping trash and sewage right into the water. This resulted in unhealthy conditions for both people and wildlife. The passage of the Clean Water Act in 1972 directed the development of water quality standards for the Chicago River. At the time, officials were convinced no one would ever want to fish or swim here so the standards were set incredibly low.

However, 35 years later, times and technology have changed and the Chicago River and its sister streams have changed with them. The decades of abuse were replaced with an age of ideas and ingenuity. Government bodies such as the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District (MWRD), which implemented the beneficial Tunnel and Reservoir Plan, began to follow new environmental regulations that protected our water resources. In addition, groups like Friends of the Chicago River focused on habitat restoration and long-range planning for river access and river improvement. The result was that today the entire river system is alive with activity both on and under the water.

Yet despite all those improvements, the outdated standards remain in place and until those standards are changed, the waterways we so desire will remain as they are: polluted.

Not for Sewage Anymore

Right now the Illinois Pollution Control Board (IPCB) is reviewing improved water quality standards for the Chicago River and Calumet River systems. A critical improvement over what we have now, these recommendations include disinfecting bacteria that pours into these waterways as a byproduct of sewage treatment and controlling other factors that can harm people and fish.

The proposed water quality standards are the result of a five-year study by the Illinois EPA. This study, called a Use Attainability Analysis (UAA), looked at the rivers' use and potential use as part of a review process required through the Clean Water Act. From their research, the Illinois EPA determined that the Chicago and Calumet systems are due higher water quality standards that would better support current and future use by people and aquatic life.

If approved, the new standards will result in the most significant water quality improvements in over 20 years.

What Waterways are Affected?

The study area for the proposed standards change is referred to as the Chicago Area Waterways, or CAWS. CAWS consists of the Chicago River, its North Branch and South Branch, the North Shore Channel, the Cal-Sag Channel, the Calumet river system, the Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal, Lake Calumet, and the tributaries in an area extending from the metropolitan Chicago area to the Lockport vicinity.

What are the Proposed Improvements?

A myriad of critical water chemistry improvements are recommended by the Illinois EPA, but Friends believes that

Friends of the Chicago River



the changes that face the biggest opposition and need the most public attention are: requiring sewage treatment plant effluent to be disinfected for people and temperature control and oxygen standards improvements for fish.

What is Disinfection?

Disinfection is the general term for several processes that can be used to substantially reduce the amount of bacteria and pathogens that are discharged in water, or effluent, that flows into our waterways as a byproduct of sewage treatment. Releasing effluent back to the natural environment is a standard treatment process, yet without disinfecting it first, the amount of bacteria is too high and studies show that people who get wet can get sick.

In 2000, Friends' research (*Waterways for Our Future*, with The Civic Federation and Openlands) found that every other major sewage treatment agency (23 dischargers) in the United States disinfected their sewage effluent. The Chicago area, and MWRD specifically, was the only one that did not and whose permits do not include it. MWRD does routinely disinfect at other suburban plants. Two other cities, St. Louis and Memphis, are being required to disinfect right now by the USEPA.

What Does Temperature Mean for Fish?

Native fish species have evolved to thrive in our local environments, or ecosystems. According to fish sampling conducted by the Illinois Department of Natural Resources and the MWRD, the Chicago River contains a diverse collection of almost 70 species of fish.

Unnaturally high water temperatures during the warm months and drastic increases in temperature during the cold months have a tremendous negative impact on the fish. In addition, the conditions associated with the release of super-heated water can also create environments that are readily utilized by invasive species, such as the Asian carp, that are able to thrive in degraded ecosystems. The proposed water quality standards include provisions that protect native fish.

Why Now?

The Illinois EPA water quality study that took place is a process that, legally, is supposed to take place every three years. Due to a lack of resources, instead this UAA was the first review of our waterways in nearly 25 years.

Right now we are at one of the most critical points in the entire process. The IPCB needs to know that there is public support for these changes when the debate takes place between those who wish to see the Chicago River continue to improve for recreation and wildlife and those who, for reasons ranging from an out of date vision of the system to a reluctance to invest in infrastructure, who do not.

We believe that as a society it is our moral obligation to ensure that we achieve the highest potential for our shared resources. Without the changes proposed by the Illinois EPA, we will be unable to move toward the next and ultimate goal of a fishable-swimmable Chicago River.

We are confident that the economic impact on the region through increased property values and increased recreation complemented by reduced flooding and combined sewer overflows, made possible by the completion of the MWRD's Tunnel and Reservoir Plan, will more than pay for the necessary investments.

What Does it Mean for You?

Clean water is guaranteed by the United States Clean Water Act and the Constitution of Illinois, yet every day all kinds of pollution is dumped into our water. This means that while we and our families and friends paddle, fish, swim, Jet Ski or row, we are exposing ourselves to harmful bacteria from sewage that can make us sick.

Friends of the Chicago River believes that we have the opportunity of a lifetime to make a new choice. A choice that celebrates our rivers as well as our lake. A choice that invests in ourselves, our health, our region and our future.

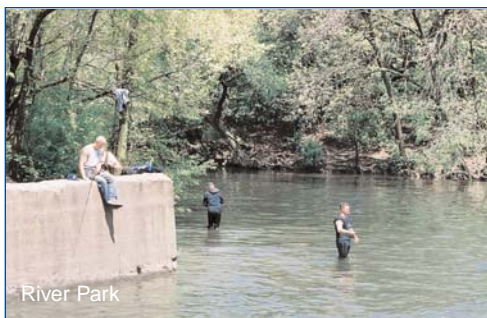
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If you swim, fish, wade, jet ski, paddle, bird, row, motor, or just enjoy the Chicago River system, the Cal-Sag Channel, or the Calumet River system you should let everyone you know you care and :

- ❖ Writ a letter to the MWRD or IPCB
- ❖ Attend an IPCB Hearing
- ❖ Become a member of Friends

Find out how at chicagoriver.org



Friends of the Chicago River



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