

Sanitary Sewer Overflow Fact Sheet

Protect Our Health and the Environment

When sanitary sewer systems operate properly, they move sanitary sewage to city wastewater treatment plants. Sometimes sanitary sewer systems can breakdown from being overloaded with more sewage flow than they can handle. When this happens, Sanitary Sewer Overflows (SSOs) occur.

What is an SSO?

An SSO is untreated, raw wastewater that flows into local waterways, such as streams, creeks, and rivers. An overflow happens when there is too much wastewater for the sewer system or treatment plant to handle, such as after heavy rainstorms. During SSOs, untreated wastewater overflows from the sewers or from the manholes connected to the sewers.

SSOs may occur during wet weather as stormwater enters the sewer system through defects, or in dry weather because of blocked sewer lines or equipment failure at pump stations. State and federal regulations now require that the Baton Rouge City/Parish and other sewer agencies reduce overflows and meet Clean Water Act requirements.



Why do SSOs occur?

Accidental overflows of raw wastewater from sanitary sewers occur in almost every system and according to U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) estimates there are at least 40,000 SSOs each year. SSOs occur for the following reasons.

- **Aging Systems:** Many of the sewer systems in older cities, such as Baton Rouge, were built in the 1800s and early 1900s. These pipe systems are cracking and leaking because they are old.
- **Lack of Capacity:** As cities grow, sewer systems may receive amounts of sanitary sewage that are much greater than the sewer was built to handle. Blockages that occur from tree roots, grease, and other debris may obstruct flow in the pipes and cause SSOs.
- **Illegal Connections:** Roof drains, catch basins, or area drains that move stormwater away from homes and businesses are sometimes illegally connected to sanitary sewer systems. These illegal connections allow stormwater to enter the sanitary sewer system and can result in overflows.
- **System Breakdown:** SSOs may occur when pump stations and other wastewater systems stop working because of power outages, equipment failures, and other system breakdowns.

Why are SSOs a serious problem?

Raw wastewater from SSOs can contaminate our waters, causing serious water quality problems. Raw wastewater overflows can expose people to risks when released to populated areas, such as streets, private property, basements, and receiving waters that may be used for drinking water, fishing, shellfishing, or recreational use.

What can be done about SSOs?

Proper wastewater system maintenance; careful design and construction of sewers, pump stations, and treatments plants; and system capacity upgrades are ways that SSOs can be avoided or eliminated.