

Out of Money, Out of Options



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Once again, Congress has cut federal assistance for states and municipalities pressed to address water and wastewater infrastructure needs.

In April, the budget revealed \$1.6 billion in funding cuts for fiscal year 2011 to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the majority of which are taken from the Clean and Drinking Water State Revolving Funds (SRFs).

The Clean Water SRF will receive \$1,521,950,000, down from \$2.1 billion in fiscal year 2010, and the Drinking Water SRF will receive \$963,070,000, down from \$1.38 billion in fiscal year 2010.

The outcome of these cuts can only result in continued decline in water quality and swelling infrastructure needs.

The National Association of Clean Water Agencies (NACWA) stated that these budget cuts are misguided and ignore the real needs and financial constraints that states and municipalities face in meeting costly requirements.

According to NACWA, when Congress enacted the Clean Water Act in 1972, it included the Construction Grants Program to assist communities in meeting new requirements. Back then, Congress allocated funding to support up to 75% of the cost to communities for compliance. In comparison, today the federal government provides 1% of the money local governments invest annually in water and wastewater infrastructure needs. It certainly doesn't take a math expert to note the significant decline in federal funding available to states and municipalities.

Just weeks after the budget cuts for fiscal year 2011 were announced, the Obama administration released a national clean water framework that demonstrates its commitment to protecting the nation's water quality and recognizing the importance of environmentally sound water practices.

While laced with a certain level of sarcasm, I do recognize the administration's efforts to promote sustainable water practices. However, I can't help but point out the painfully obvious: Municipalities need more than commitment and partnerships—they need money to take on growing infrastructure costs.

I think it is time for states to face the fact that, with the current state of our national debt, future availability of federal funding will continue to diminish. This certainly will present significant challenges, but I find it hard to believe that we have run out of options.

I think it is time for our industry to enter a new era, one which drives municipalities not only to search for long-term productivity improvements and cost reductions, but most of all builds public awareness of the real costs associated with providing sustainable water and wastewater services to communities of all sizes across the nation.

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