

This Day in Water History

A little bit of water history—one day at a time

July 28, 1909: Stream Pollution in America



July 28, 1909: *Municipal Journal and Engineer* article. Stream Pollution in America. "At a Conference of State and Provincial Boards of Health of North America, held in Washington last June, the Committee on the Pollution of Streams appointed last year presented a report in which it gave some data concerning the extent to which the pollution of streams was being regulated by the various States. Ohio, New Jersey and Kansas have, according to this report, passed laws during the last few years which "are

especially worthy of note as indicating advancement and the confidence which the Legislatures of these States must feel in these State Boards of Health." From the reports of the secretaries of the Boards of Health of the several States they abstract a number of statements showing what is being accomplished by them.

In Massachusetts the use of the larger rivers as direct sources of public water supplies without purification has practically ceased; but polluted river waters are still used in many factories and mills for purposes other than drinking [however, incidental drinking of these waters was well known]. Of the 92 cities and towns in that State having systems of sewerage, four cities and 19 towns employ some form of treatment for the removal of organic matter from the sewage. This is exactly one-fourth of the total number.

In New Jersey there are 54 sewage purification plants in operation or ready for operation by municipalities and large public institutions. The policy of that State is to allow no untreated sewage to be discharged from **new systems** into waters of the State. The Board of Health is also compelling municipalities to install purification plants on existing sewerage systems, and 22 are now under orders to cease pollution of the streams, these including all municipalities on the Delaware River.

The Ohio State Board of Health has been asked to investigate 18 complaints under the act prohibiting stream pollution, and has ordered sewage disposal works to be installed in four of the cities before Jan. 1, 1910. The constitutionality of the law under which they act has been questioned, but if decided in their favor they hope to prevent the pollution of all the streams in the State.

In Michigan there are several cities and villages using septic tanks, and the Legislature is being urged to pass laws for the control of water supplies and treatment of sewage. In California the size of the streams affords such dilution as to prevent serious trouble [seriously???], but the State Board of Health is endeavoring to cultivate a sentiment against allowing sewage to enter them. In Florida the reverse is the case, most of the streams being small or sluggish and many of the towns and cities, particularly in the interior, use filtration plants. In Maryland many of the larger towns maintain sewage disposal plants, but about 120 restraining orders have been issued against municipalities and corporations during the past year on account of stream pollution. It is reported that the large rivers of the western shore are polluted, some badly.

In New Hampshire there is not a single sewage disposal plant in operation, but the State Board of Health has prohibited the pollution of several of the lakes and streams from which public water supplies are taken and reports that none of these, except the Merrimac and Connecticut rivers, can be said to be badly polluted. Indiana's new anti-pollution law, passed this year, forbids the pollution of streams, its enforcement being in the hands of the State Board of Health. The condition there is said to be a serious one, as the ground water supply is giving out, except in the northern part of the State, and all water supplies must be obtained from the streams. In Texas the question of stream pollution is assuming prominence. Houston treats its sewage on 15 acres of sand filters; but, in general, the question is just beginning to assume importance, the centers of population being quite widely scattered. Wisconsin aims to forbid absolutely the discharge of crude sewage into any of its waterways. Septic tanks and filter beds are used quite extensively.

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In Vermont the State Board of Health five years ago ordered that no sewage should be discharged into any stream or body of water without its permission. Five cities and villages of the State, which were taking their supply from polluted sources, were directed to secure their new supply from sources approved by the Board. (This seems to be the reverse of the action elsewhere, where the main efforts have been to prevent the pollution of the water rather than the use of polluted water. We believe it is the unquestionable duty of Boards of Health both to restrict pollution and also to prevent the use of unsafe water.)

Colorado reports inability to obtain legislation necessary for preventing pollution. The same condition exists in Minnesota likewise, and two marked typhoid epidemics have resulted in that State from stream pollution. Kansas reports 15 disposal plants in operation, or about to be installed, all of the septic tank and filter-bed type. The State Board there is upheld by a very strong and workable law. In New York many of the streams are very badly polluted and the condition is very serious. There are about 50 sewage disposal plants in operation, and the State Health Department requires cities extending their systems or building new ones to make provisions for sewage purification plants to be in operation at the end of a specified time."

Commentary: The article is reprinted here in its entirety because it is an astonishing time capsule against which we can measure our progress. The important thread that runs through most of the state reports is that pollution of waterways was prohibited by state law. However, we know from other sources that these laws were seldom enforced or had penalties that were too lenient, so they were ignored.

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July 27, 1976: Legionnaire's Disease in Philadelphia; 1905: Consideration of Owens Valley Water Supply for Los Angeles