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Polluted rivers: America's disgrace

Water consumption in the U.S. last year reached an astronomical 170 billion gallons a day for all uses—drinking, farms, homes, factories, businesses. It amounted to a total consumption of 1,100 gallons a day per person.

Last week, in the first national survey of water quality ever made in the U.S., the Federal Security Agency gave some idea of what that water is like. Two thirds of the drinking water comes from rivers, lakes and surface sources; “a considerable portion of it has already been flushed through someone else’s bathroom”; the total pollution load of lakes and streams, including pollution from industry, “is conservatively estimated to exceed the raw untreated sewage from a population of 150 million people . . . by sheer coincidence . . . our present population.”

Some 11,800 municipal sewer systems and 10,400 factories discharge their waste into national waters, the FSA survey found. Municipal sewers pour out everything from toilet flushings to home and restaurant garbage and hospital and mortuary refuse. Industrial wastes include damaging oils, acids, chemicals and animal and vegetable material.

Rotten Rivers. Filthiest of all rivers from municipal pollution is the Ohio (PATHFINDER, May 2), with the rivers of the California drainage basin (Sacramento, San Joaquin, Klamath and Salinas) a close second. Filthiest from industrial pollution are the rivers of the Pacific Northwest (Columbia, Snake, Willamette and Pend Oreille) with the Missouri River Basin streams (Missouri, North and South Platte, Kansas and Yellowstone) not far behind. No major waterways are pollution free. “Our cities and industries,” said the report, “have far outstripped facilities to control water pollution.”

The outstripped facilities include 6,700 municipal sewage plants and 2,600 industrial plants now in operation. Needed now are at least 6,000 more municipal plants or additions and 3,500 more industrial waste treatment plants. Total cost of a national municipal and industrial abatement program—including allowance for obsolescence of old plants, needs of new communities, population increases and other factors in the next ten years: \$9 billion to \$12 billion.

“To restore our rivers, lakes and bays to full use after a century of polluting them is a tremendous task,” concluded the FSA, declaring that communities and industries must be responsible for installing treatment works. “But . . . the sooner the job is attacked the better. Such a policy will succeed, however, only if backed by the individual citizen.”