

## \$229M from feds slated for sewage treatment facilities

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The federal government is giving New Jersey \$229 million in low-interest loans and grants to make treatment facilities more resilient after billions of gallons of raw sewage spilled into waterways when the sewer plants were damaged by superstorm Sandy.

The money could also be used to improve drinking-water facilities, as well as for green infrastructure projects, such as retention basins and rain gardens that can cut down on the storm runoff that often causes older sewer systems to overflow into local rivers and bays.

When Sandy struck last October, it incapacitated sewer treatment facilities from Washington to Connecticut, causing an estimated 11 billion gallons of sewage to flow into rivers and bays.

The storm shut down New Jersey's largest sewage treatment plant, the [Passaic Valley Sewerage Commission's](#) facility in Newark, which handles the flow from 1.5 million customers in dozens of North Jersey towns along both sides of the Passaic River.

On a typical day, the facility treats 250 million gallons of sewage. But Sandy pushed a 5-foot wave of water from Newark Bay into the plant, flooding a network of tunnels and equipment, and knocking out power and backup emergency generators. "The plant was crippled," said Judith Enck, the federal Environmental Protection Agency's regional administrator.

Raw sewage backed up in the lines, and for several days 840 million gallons of it flowed untreated into the [Passaic](#) River and other local water bodies. During the three weeks after Sandy, as the facility was brought back into service, an estimated 4.4 billion gallons of partially treated sewage seeped into New York Harbor.

## **Sewage a danger**

Raw sewage can cause illnesses such as gastroenteritis — a stomach inflammation that causes vomiting and diarrhea — as well as hepatitis and skin, respiratory and ear infections. The sewage can also inflict economic damage, such as lost revenue from beach closures, fish kills and closed shellfish beds.

The \$229 million announced Thursday by the EPA could also pay for dunes to protect facilities and for renewable backup energy systems.

The EPA announcement "is encouraging news and recognition that wastewater treatment plants need these additional funds to recover from Sandy's devastation, rebuild our infrastructure and reduce the risk of flood damage in the future," said Michael DeFrancisci, the [Passaic](#) Valley Sewerage Commission's executive director. He said the commission "will be pursuing this program and all viable avenues for funding assistance."

Thursday's announcement was also applauded by environmental groups. "We welcome the news," said Debbie Mans, with the NY/NJ Baykeeper. "It is not nearly enough to cover all the resiliency projects we'll have to do, but it's a start. We can't have these facilities fail again on such a large scale."

The EPA announced \$340 million in similar grants and loans for New York state.

As New York and New Jersey continue to rebuild their sensitive infrastructure after Sandy, the goal is to "do so in a way that's smarter," said acting EPA Administrator Bob Perciasepe. "Sandy won't be the last superstorm we face."