June 16, 2020

The Honorable John Barrasso
Chairman
Committee on Environment and Public Works
U.S. Senate
Washington D.C., 20510

Dear Chairman Barrasso:

The California Association of Sanitation Agencies (CASA) writes to provide written testimony in support of S. 3944, Break Free From Plastic Pollution Act of 2020, sponsored by Senator Tom Udall. We appreciate the leadership Senator Udall and this committee has taken to address the serious environmental and economic issues associated with plastic pollution.

CASA represents more than 125 public wastewater utilities across the State of California and serves as the leading voice for California clean water agencies on regulatory, legislative and legal issues. We represent our members at the State and Federal level to promote policies that protect public health and environment. The public health, economic, and environmental costs of plastic pollution can no longer be ignored. In the U.S. alone, 32 million tons of plastic waste is disposed of yearly and only about 8% of it is sorted to be recycled. Eight million tons of plastic waste escapes into the ocean every year. Studies document that plastic pollution is so pervasive that people ingest a credit card’s worth of plastic every week through the presence micro-plastics. However, the detrimental impacts of plastic pollution are not confined to the environment. Local governments, which are already burdened by overstretched budgets, are routinely burdened with responsibility of managing plastic waste, despite not having the necessary monetary resources to sufficiently address the issue.

S. 3944 would directly address these and many other issues by taking a multi-pronged approach to the threats from plastic pollution. It would require plastics manufactures and businesses to be responsible for the products they create from cradle to grave; create a national beverage container refund program; establish minimum recycled-content requirements for beverage containers, packaging, and food-service products; standardize recycling and composting labeling; and, spur large-scale investment(s) in domestic recycling and composting infrastructure.

CASA supports S. 3944 and advocates for its passage in large measure because of its provisions to address a much-neglected aspect of plastic-related pollution: wipes products that contain synthetic content. Over the last year, CASA worked with Congress offering our perspective on the impacts of wipes upon the reliable operation of clean water facilities that are tasked with protecting human health and the environment. The flushing of single-use wet wipes down the drain has created significant and needless additional operating costs for our agencies, and this challenge has increased exponentially as our communities seek to protect themselves from COVID-19 through rigid adherence to sanitary health protocols. Many of these wipes contain synthetic plastic content, and such products improperly disposed of can clog sewer lines, damage
pump and treatment infrastructure, and ultimately result in increased plastic pollution in the environment.

This is an issue that has plagued not only CASA agencies, but also wastewater agencies across the country. CASA greatly appreciates that language to require commonsense labeling of these products is included in the legislation. This mandate is vital to our communities’ health and to ensuring that we can control costs of collection and treatment by eliminating the inappropriate disposal of non-flushable wipes through our sewers.

Over the years, single-use wet wipes have increased in popularity. Popular examples of these products include diaper wipes, cosmetic wipes, moist towelettes, and hygiene wipes. While these products can be hygienically effective and efficient, they also cause rampant and costly adverse impacts to community sewer systems and wastewater treatment facilities. This is due to the common, but incorrect, disposal method utilized by too many consumers: flushing the wipes down the toilet. The piping and pumping infrastructure of wastewater collection systems is not designed to handle these wipes, particularly in large quantities. Instead, these wipes should be disposed of in trash bins. There is a lack of clear and effective product disposal messaging by single-use wet wipes manufacturers that directly leads to this type of consumer behavior, and proper labeling could go a long way to alleviating some of this burden on our public wastewater systems.

Despite the look and feel of wet wipes resembling cotton, many of the single-use wet wipes that are on the market are made of nonwoven synthetic materials, such as polyester, polypropylene, and regenerated cellulosic fibers. As a result, when these products are flushed down the drain, the wipes do not break down as they travel through the sewer systems to the treatment facilities, causing a multitude of undue and costly problems to sewer and treatment infrastructure, including adding to the overall burden of plastic pollution in the environment.

The Flushing of Single-Use Wet Wipes Harms Public Infrastructure

Once a person flushes a single-use wet wipe down the drain, there are three potential outcomes, none of which are beneficial. First, the wipe can cause immediate damage to the individual’s plumbing by clogging the pipes and requiring expensive and intrusive repairs. Second, wipes can enter into sewer lines that connect to their community’s sewer collection system and treatment facility, where the wipe can catch on tree roots and accumulate with fats, oils and grease and become large obstructions in the pipes. Further down the line, they weave together and create giant rags, which get stuck in pumps, collection systems, and motors, causing backups and equipment failures. Finally, if the wipe somehow makes it through the sewer and treatment systems, their microfiber and micro-plastic particles can still be discharged into the aquatic environment. CASA has created an easily digestible chart that explains the various problems that can arise from flushing a single wet wipe. It is attached in the appendices of our testimony.

The coronavirus pandemic has only exacerbated the wet wipe problem. As people were ordered to stay-at-home and were stressed on the importance of maintaining robust hygienic standards, certain household products became ever more crucial to have and use. At the top of the list were single-use wet wipes. Due to the uncertainty surrounding the characteristics of the coronavirus,
people wanted to ensure that their households were constantly free from harmful germs. Many of these wipes were improperly flushed down the toilet, leading to a sharp increase in issues experience by some wastewater collection and treatment agencies during the early stages of the pandemic. The result of this has been sewer systems and treatment facilities being over-run by clogged pipes and pumps, damaged infrastructure, and an overworked sanitation workforce. This has been documented in local newspapers across the country, as well as in national papers, such as the Washington Post and New York Times. The problem became so severe that at the end of March, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency published a press release reminding the public to only flush toilet paper, specifically stating that non-flushable wet wipes should be disposed of in the trash.

The Flushing of Single-Use Wipes is a Consumer Awareness Issue

One of the main reasons single-use wet wipes are flushed down the toilet is because people do not know this is improper. There is no standard or required labeling procedure for product packaging to tell people to not flush the wipes, such as a statement of “Do Not Flush” or a moniker of a toilet with an “X” through it. While there may be instances when there is such messaging on a voluntary basis, often times it is in small print or hidden under the flaps and folds of the packaging. This voluntary, often hidden labeling is insufficient to properly inform consumers about the nature of these products and the consequences of disposing of them improperly. Wipes manufacturers have been reluctant to put anything on their product that would potentially make use of the product somehow more cumbersome or undesirable, but something must be done. Failure to address this issue means that sewer system and treatment facility infrastructure, local governments, and ratepayers will continue to bare the brunt of unnecessary repair costs and environmental consequences of improperly disposed of wipes.

How S. 3944 Addresses This Issue

Under Section 12304 of the legislation, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency would require wipes manufacturers, in coordination with the broader supply chain, to print a statement of “Do Not Flush” that is in high color and font contrast on product packaging to ensure visibility. This moniker and symbol would be in accordance with already established voluntary guidelines for labeling practices of the nonwoven fabrics industry and European Disposables and Nonwovens Association, outlined in the 2017 second edition, ‘Communicating Appropriate Disposal Pathways for Nonwoven Wipes to Protect Wastewater Systems.’ Additionally, S. 3944 establishes the marketing standard that if a wet wipe product is composed of plastic and other synthetic materials, then the product is not allowed to be advertised as flushable or septic safe and it must be labeled as containing plastic or synthetic materials.

For the few wipes products that do not contain plastic or synthetic materials, and may be septic and sewer safe, the product labeling may include a ‘flushable’ statement or ‘sewer and septic safe’ statement if the wipe product meets the performance standards for dispersibility in a sewer system or septic system established by the International Water Services Flushability Group, and do not contain chemicals or additives harmful to the public wastewater infrastructure.
S. 3944 offers simple and effective solutions to help better inform the public about the true nature and proper disposal of these wipes products. It does not disallow or inhibit the manufacturing or use of synthetic wet wipes, it does not establish a new practice for disposing of the product, and it does not place cumbersome regulatory standards on manufacturers or producers. It simply makes clear to the consumer how to best use the product for its intended purpose through a printed packaging statement and moniker.

A Simple Solution to Addressing the Flushing Of Single-Use Wet Wipes

In a time when COVID-19 has highlighted the vital role that wastewater treatment professionals and infrastructure play in protecting our health and welfare, we need policies that will help local agencies ensure efficient operations while increasing the ability to use our limited resources for critical needs. Clean water agencies are already incurring significant revenue losses attributable to COVID-19, making it increasingly difficult to do more with fewer resources. Increasing maintenance costs to remove non-flushable wipes that obstruct system operations, or replacing pump and treatment infrastructure damaged by wipes products, are not a valuable use of public resources.

No justification exists to make wastewater treatment agencies, and ultimately their ratepayers, use precious public funds to manage a problem that they did not create, and which has a simple solution. S. 3944’s provisions to require straightforward labeling and conformance with international standards defining the kind of wipe that is flushable will prevent many non-flushable wipes from being disposed of through sewers. CASA supports S. 3944 and urge the committee to act swiftly and approve the bill.

Thank you for your, and the committee’s, attention to this important issue. Please do not hesitate to contact me at (916) 446-0388 or alink@casaweb.org if you need additional information regarding this topic.

Sincerely,

Adam D. Link
Executive Director
Appendix

**Wipes Clog Pipes**

**Flushed Wipes**
Flushed wet wipes down the toilet can clog plumbing systems, leading to expensive repairs. Many people don’t know that wipes shouldn’t go in the toilet and pose a risk for sewer infrastructure.

**Clogged Sewer Lines**
Wipes make their way into private sewer laterals, septic systems, and sewer lines and can cause extensive harm and result in overflows and property damage.

**Sewer Overflows**
Once wipes make it to the sewer collection system, they can catch on roots that infiltrate pipes, weave together to form large rags and attract fats, oils and grease. This can result in blockages and sewer spills.

**Environmental Harm**
Even when wipes filter out of the wastewater stream, small microfibers and microplastics can shed off wipes. These fibers can’t be captured and can make their way into the environment.

**Disrupted Treatment Plants**
Oftentimes, masses of wipes manage to make it through the collection system and end up at wastewater treatment plants, which can result in significant damage to treatment infrastructure and recurrent disruption of the treatment process.

**Damaged Collection Systems**
Most collection systems rely on pumps to move wastewater to treatment facilities. Wipes can clog these pumps, resulting in spills, system failures, increased maintenance requirements and damage to expensive equipment.

**CASA**
CALIFORNIA ASSOCIATION OF SANITATION AGENCIES

casa.web.org/wipes