

Board Grants “Time-Limited Water Quality Standard” to MWRD for Dissolved Oxygen

On December 16, 2021, the Board issued an order granting a “time-limited water quality standard” (TLWQS) to the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago (MWRD). A TLWQS is a form of temporary relief from a Board water quality standard. MWRD sought a dissolved oxygen TLWQS to account for discharges into the Chicago Area Waterways System (CAWS) from combined sewer overflow (CSO) outfalls. These CSO outfalls are associated with MWRD’s O’Brien, Calumet, and Stickney water reclamation plants. The TLWQS has a five-year term.

A combined sewer system carries stormwater and wastewater to MWRD’s reclamation plants. However, when heavy rainfalls occur, excess stormwater can overwhelm the capacities of the collection systems and reclamation plants, resulting in discharges from CSO outfalls. These outfalls provide relief from local flooding, but they do so by allowing untreated excess flow from the combined sewer system to be discharged directly into the CAWS. CSO discharges contribute to non-compliance with the Board’s dissolved oxygen water quality standards by lowering dissolved oxygen levels in the CAWS. Portions of the CAWS currently do not meet the dissolved oxygen water quality standards due to CSO discharges. Sufficient levels of dissolved oxygen are necessary for aquatic plant and animal life.

The TLWQS issued by the Board specifies the “highest attainable condition” (HAC) of the designated receiving segments of the CAWS during the term of the relief. The HAC includes requirements related to MWRD’s multi-decade construction project, the Tunnel and Reservoir Plan (TARP). The goal of TARP is to eliminate CSO discharges into the CAWS by constructing large reservoirs that capture untreated excess flow and store it until the reclamation plants can begin treatment. TARP is expected to be completed in 2029. To improve dissolved oxygen levels in the meantime, the HAC includes specified interim pollution minimization measures, among other requirements.

Before adopting the TLWQS, the Board held a public hearing and reviewed MWRD’s demonstration and the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency’s recommendation, as well as public comments from other participants, including the United States Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA). The TLWQS will take effect for federal Clean Water Act purposes after approval by USEPA. The ultimate objective remains compliance with the underlying dissolved oxygen water quality standards, which still apply in the CAWS to all discharges not covered by the TLWQS.

This TLWQS proceeding is captioned Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago v. Illinois Environmental Protection Agency, docket PCB 16-28. Here is a link to the Board’s December 16, 2021 [order](#).