

## GOWANUS CANAL

### After 150 Years of Neglect Brooklyn's Lavender Lake Must be Cleaned Up!



#### Introduction

After almost 150 years of industrial use and decades of raw sewage discharges from New York City's sewers, the Gowanus Canal has become one of the nation's most contaminated bodies of water. The putrid sediments at the bottom of the canal contain PCBs, heavy metals, pesticides, volatile organic compounds, sewage solids and coal tar wastes. Adding to this toxic legacy, the manufactured gas plants (MGP), cement factories, oil refineries, tanneries, chemical plants and other industries that have called the canal home also have left behind underground plumes of pollution and contaminated the land and the groundwater, which continues to leach toxins

into the canal.

#### Water Quality

The Gowanus Canal is officially considered "impaired waters" by New York State, and is classified as unsuitable for fish propagation or certain forms of recreation, such as swimming and kayaking. In other words, it's so dirty the state doesn't think you should kayak in it, much less swim or fish. Although contamination from past industrial uses is one reason why water quality is so poor, the biggest impact on the Gowanus is from combined sewer overflows (CSOs). About half the time it rains in New York City, once a week on average, raw sewage and polluted runoff combine in sewer pipes and overflow – without treatment – into the City's surface waters. In an average rain year, about 27 billion gallons of this untreated wastewater pour out of the City's sewer system into the Hudson and East Rivers, Newtown Creek and the Gowanus canal.

In the Gowanus 11 CSO outfalls discharge close to 400 million gallons of untreated sewage and runoff per year into the 1.8 mile canal. Water quality testing conducted by Riverkeeper has frequently found unacceptably high *Enterococcus* counts (an indicator of sewage). The EPA standard for beach closure is a single water sample with a value of greater than 104 *Enterococcus*/100ml, or five or more samples with a geometric mean (a weighted average) greater than 35 *Enterococcus*/100ml. Sampling in the Gowanus after rain events has found *Enterococcus* counts as high as 24,000/100ml.



The City is currently under order from the New York Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) to reduce the volume of combined sewer overflows that enter the canal and to rehabilitate the flushing tunnel that pushes cleaner water into the head of the canal from New York Harbor to move stagnant water out.

#### Brownfields and Upland Pollution Sources

Because of the lengthy history of industrial use of the Canal and the surrounding area almost every parcel of land along the Canal is contaminated in some way. Several sites on the banks of the canal are in the process of being cleaned up under DEC supervision, including the future Whole Foods site at Third Street and Third Avenue, the Toll Brothers site on Bond Street, the Public Place/Carroll Gardens MGP site at Fifth and Smith streets, the Fulton Works MGP site on Sackett and DeGraw Streets, and the Metropolitan MGP site at 12<sup>th</sup> Street and Second Avenue. Other sites, such as the Bayside Fuel Depot on Sackett St., were once proposed for cleanup under the state's Voluntary Cleanup Program, but are not currently moving forward.

Many of these contaminated sites continue to leach pollutants into the Gowanus Canal.



## **Superfund**

On April 8, 2009, the federal Environmental Protection Agency announced a proposal to include the Gowanus Canal in the federal Superfund Program, which cleans up hazardous sites. This followed a request from the DEC, which acknowledged that cleaning up the Gowanus would be too complicated for the state to handle.

While still pending, inclusion of the Gowanus Canal in the federal Superfund program would start the process of fully studying and comprehensively cleaning the decades of contaminated sediment in the bottom of the canal. A Superfund designation would also create a plan to identify and stop upland sources of pollution that are still leaching into the Canal. Superfund also brings with it legal tools to force polluters to pay for any cleanup and funding to pay for any sites where those responsible cannot be located.

## **What We Are Doing**

In addition to regular water quality sampling Riverkeeper staff is actively patrolling the Gowanus Canal and working with members of law enforcement to bring polluters to justice. Riverkeeper has also been active in the Gowanus, and across the City and state, advocating for the need to reduce and eliminate CSO discharges. Riverkeeper has also been a vocal supporter of the proposal to include the Gowanus Canal in the federal Superfund program and submitted extensive legal comments on the proposal to the EPA.



## **About Riverkeeper**

Riverkeeper's mission is to safeguard the ecological integrity of the Hudson River, its tributaries and the watersheds that provide New York City and residents of Westchester, Putnam, Orange and Ulster Counties with their drinking water. For more than 40 years we have been the Hudson River's leading watchdog and advocate. Riverkeeper believes in the rights of every citizen to enjoy and defend our nation's waterways and pursues long term solutions to solve the challenges facing our water resources. We have helped to establish globally recognized standards for waterway and watershed protection and serve as the model and mentor for the growing Waterkeeper movement that includes more than 182 Keeper programs across the country and around the globe.

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