

Background on Sewage Overflows in Baytown

In February 2022, Bayou City Waterkeeper issued a notice of intent to sue the City of Baytown under the Clean Water Act. This action mirrors our earlier legal efforts in Houston, which led to a landmark consent decree in 2021 requiring a \$2 billion investment in critical wastewater infrastructure over 15 years. In Baytown, we are addressing similar systemic issues with the city's aging sanitary sewer system.

Our investigation in Baytown identified over 800 likely violations of the Clean Water Act, including 882 sanitary sewer overflows between 2016 and 2021. These overflows released more than 21 million gallons of untreated sewage into the environment. Our analysis also found that the highest-volume overflows have disproportionately affected Hispanic/Latine communities in Baytown — raising serious concerns about environmental justice.

Sanitary sewer overflows (SSOs) occur when untreated or partially treated sewage escapes a wastewater system before reaching a treatment facility. Overflows may take many forms:

- **Heavy rainfall can overwhelm combined storm and sewer systems, sending millions of gallons of raw sewage into nearby bayous, creeks, rivers, and bays.**
- **Sewage can back up into homes, public parks, and neighborhoods.**
- **System failures — whether due to poor maintenance, aging infrastructure, blockages, or mechanical breakdowns — can all trigger these dangerous incidents.**

No matter how they occur, SSOs contaminate local waterways, pose serious public health risks, and often violate the Clean Water Act. Our work in Baytown seeks to hold the city accountable, protect water quality, and advance equitable environmental protections for all communities.

The data shows a clear pattern: sewage overflows are happening most often in neighborhoods where many Latine/o/x families live. These overflows can create serious health and safety issues, especially in places that already face long-standing infrastructure challenges and historical disinvestment. The map on the right helps show where these patterns appear in Baytown.

The darker shaded areas indicate neighborhoods with higher Hispanic or Latino populations. The circles outlined in orange represent sewage overflows, with larger circles showing bigger overflow events.



Baytown Sewage Justice

Baytown Sewage Justice through Bayou City Waterkeeper

Bayou City Waterkeeper is addressing Baytown's wastewater challenges through a multi-faceted strategy rooted in environmental justice, community advocacy, and nature-based solutions. Our work focuses on advancing transparency, language justice, and infrastructure investments that prioritize both public health and ecological restoration.

We are pushing for greater transparency from the City of Baytown to ensure residents have timely and accessible information about sewage overflows. This includes advocating for public notification systems in multiple languages, so all residents – regardless of language or literacy – understand when and how overflows occur, and what risks they pose.

Language justice is central to our approach. In communities like Baytown, where many residents affected by sewer overflows speak languages other than English, effective communication must reflect and respect the area's linguistic diversity.

To mitigate sewage and wastewater pollution in Baytown, we are also calling for increased public investment in long-term, equitable infrastructure solutions. This includes:

- **Nature-based approaches such as green infrastructure, bioswales, and wetland restoration to reduce strain on sewer systems by absorbing stormwater and filtering pollution naturally.**
- **Community-informed planning that brings residents to the table in shaping decisions about sewage investment and flood resilience.**
- **Organizing strategies that create opportunities for community leaders to help shape and develop strategies for engagement ensure that outreach efforts are grounded in lived experience, culturally relevant, and responsive to the specific needs and priorities of the community.**

Environmental and Health Risks in Baytown

Industrial activity in Baytown creates serious environmental and public health risks, especially for nearby working-class and Hispanic/Latine communities. Pollution from chemical plants and refineries contaminates air, water, and soil, contributing to higher rates of respiratory illness, cancer, and other health issues. Chemical spills and industrial accidents, particularly during storms, further threaten community safety and environmental stability.

Sewage pollution adds to these dangers. Sanitary sewer overflows (SSOs) from aging infrastructure release untreated sewage into neighborhoods and waterways, spreading disease, polluting fishing and recreation areas, and worsening flooding—especially in underserved areas with limited green infrastructure.

Baytown Sewage Justice

What Can We Do to Advocate for Clean Water in Baytown?

The intersection of industrial pollution and sewage overflows creates a toxic burden that threatens public health and the natural environment. These overlapping hazards reflect broader patterns of underinvestment and environmental injustice in Baytown. At Bayou City Waterkeeper, we believe that a healthier, more just future is possible—one rooted in community power and environmental equity. By working together, we can protect our water, our health, and our dignity.

A Path Forward for Baytown's Water Future

To create a cleaner, safer, and more resilient Baytown, both city leaders and community members can play a role in shaping solutions that work for everyone:

- **Support trusted community leaders in guiding outreach and decision-making, especially those with deep roots in neighborhoods most impacted by flooding, overflows, and pollution.**
- **Ensure language access for all by making public alerts, notices, and planning materials available in Spanish and other languages spoken in Baytown — so that no one is left out of the conversation.**
- **Invest in green, nature-based solutions — like rain gardens, bioswales, and permeable pavements — to absorb stormwater, protect local ecosystems, and ease pressure on aging sewer systems.**
- **Offer household-level programs that help residents install rain barrels, maintain private sewer lines, and adopt small-scale green infrastructure solutions. These can especially support low-income households who face the biggest challenges during storms and backups.**
- **Improve transparency by sharing clear, multilingual updates about sewer overflows and industrial incidents, so residents can stay informed and safe.**



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