



Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago

# Press Release

**Allison Fore**

Public and Intergovernmental Affairs Officer

312.751.6626

allison.fore@mwrdd.org

100 East Erie Street, Chicago, Illinois 60611

For immediate release  
January 20, 2016

## MWRD urges FDA to cease recommendation of flushing medications



*Too often unwanted medicine gets flushed down toilets and drains, only to be forgotten until it ends up in local waterways and contaminates aquatic life and harms potential critical water sources.*

Due to the potential harm that improper disposal of pharmaceutical products pose to the environment, the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago (MWRD) is challenging the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to end its “flush list” recommendation.

In a letter to the FDA, MWRD Executive Director David St. Pierre asked that the agency work with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and the White House Office of National Drug Policy to develop guidelines for consumers about making safe disposal of medication.

“We call on the FDA to end its recommendation that certain medications be disposed by flushing and to clarify that secure medicine take-back programs provide the best disposal method for leftover household medications,” Director St. Pierre wrote in his letter addressed to Dr. Stephen Ostroff, acting commissioner of



*Employees of the MWRD show a few handfuls of the 237 pounds of unwanted pharmaceuticals that were collected in September as part of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration's National Prescription Drug Take-Back Day held at MWRD facilities.*

the FDA. “We appreciate the FDA’s efforts to protect people from leftover medications that can be particularly harmful, even fatal, if abused or mistakenly consumed. However, the time has come for FDA to align its medicine disposal guidance with that of federal and local agencies who seek to protect both the public’s health and our water quality.”

The FDA currently recommends that consumers dispose of certain medications by flushing them down the toilet. The list recommends potent drugs, such as oxycodone, Percodan, Percocet, morphine sulfate and Demerol be flushed. However, by flushing these drugs down into the sewer system, citizens are contributing to the pharmaceutical pollution that is harming aquatic ecosystems and entering the food web.

Using advanced analytical equipment, scientists can detect these compounds in all types of water, including groundwater, streams, wastewater and drinking water. While there is no evidence to suggest risk to human



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312.751.6632

[allison.fore@mwrdd.org](mailto:allison.fore@mwrdd.org)

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## MWRD urges FDA *(continued)*

health, scientists have found interference with aquatic organisms, and numerous studies show significant effects pharmaceutical drugs have on aquatic life pulled from area waterways. MWRD water treatment facilities are designed to remove human waste and easily degraded organics, but these facilities cannot effectively remove pharmaceuticals and other complex, synthetic chemicals that are often broken down in the water.

The MWRD letter was further supported on Jan. 7, when the MWRD Board of Commissioners passed a resolution endorsing a call to action for the FDA to develop guidelines on the safe disposal of leftover household medicines.

“We appreciate the U.S. Food and Drug Administration’s efforts in improving and protecting the health of our nation, but in this instance we call on them to stop recommending the disposal of medication down drains,” said MWRD President Mariyana Spyropoulos. “Medications like these can dissolve in water and impair aquatic life and our waterways. This is a reminder we have a long way to go in educating the public on protecting our water environment.”

In September, the MWRD collected 237 pounds of unwanted pharmaceuticals that are often mistakenly deposited in toilets and drains and destined for local waterways. In conjunction with the DEA Chicago Field Division, the MWRD hosted the National Prescription Drug Take-Back Day at its Main Office Building and three water reclamation plants across the Chicago area.

It is estimated that 30 to 40 percent of all medications sold become leftover and expired medications in American homes, resulting in a significant need for

safe methods of disposal. To complicate the strategy in curbing this pharmaceutical pollution, there is no consistent directive on the disposing of medicines between federal agencies and state and local authorities. These conflicting strategies and lack of guidance against flushing causes confusion for the general public.

The MWRD recommends the FDA work to create a single disposal guidance that is endorsed by all federal agencies and consistently used on all federal websites and materials. The public should be directed to store medications securely in locked containers or cupboards, to use secure medicine take-back programs where available, never to flush medications, and to dispose of medications in the trash only as a last resort where allowed by local ordinances. The MWRD Board of Commissioners encouraged adoption of the following, clear messages on safe medicine disposal:

1. To protect water quality, never flush unwanted medicine down any drain.
2. Use a community medicine take-back program for secure and safe medicine disposal. Check with local household hazardous waste, wastewater, or police departments for locations. Use the medicine manufacturer’s mail-back program if available.
3. Take leftover medicines to the Drug Enforcement Administration’s twice a year National Prescription Drug Take-Back Days. Look for a site in your community at [http://www.deadiversion.usdoj.gov/drug\\_disposal/takeback/](http://www.deadiversion.usdoj.gov/drug_disposal/takeback/) or contact your police department.

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**Recovering Resources, Transforming Water**

*Established in 1889, the MWRD ([www.mwrdd.org](http://www.mwrdd.org)) is an award-winning, special purpose government agency responsible for wastewater treatment and stormwater management in Cook County, Illinois.*