*National Effluent Standards*

The Clean Water Act requires EPA to establish national “Effluent Limitation Guidelines” to minimize the discharges of pollutants from slaughterhouses and other large industrial or municipal sources of wastewater. These limits, which apply to “conventional” pollutants like bacteria or ammonia as well as to toxins like nitrate compounds, are generally designed to reflect the best available treatment processes that are economically affordable and apply to all plants within a given industrial category. The standard for slaughterhouses was last updated by EPA in 2004, and sets maximum limits on the monthly discharges and daily discharges of ammonia, total nitrogen, biological oxygen demand, total suspended solids, and oil and grease, and on the concentration of fecal coliform that may be discharged at any time. For example, the wastewater from poultry processors must not contain more than:

• 103 milligrams of total nitrogen per liter of wastewater, based on average monthly discharges, or 147 milligrams/liter per day;

• A monthly average Biological Oxygen Demand of 16 milligrams per liter, or 26 milligrams per liter in any single day’s discharges;

• 400 “colony forming” units of fecal coliform at any time.

These federal rules establish a baseline that all plants must meet, no matter where they are located. The Clean Water Act allows states to adopt more stringent standards, and in fact requires that they do so when needed to protect or restore water quality. Yet states do not always exercise this responsibility. For example, total nitrogen limits for at least 41 of the 68 poultry processors require no more than the minimum national standard.

Furthermore, the data suggest that the 2004 standards are too lax and out of date. For example, it allows slaughterhouses to dump wastes into streams and lakes with more than two and a half times the concentration of total nitrogen found in raw household sewage. At the same time, the discharge monitoring reports show that slaughterhouse wastewater can be made much cleaner.