The 7.9 billion gallon Thornton Reservoir, part of the Calumet TARP system.

The Tunnel and Reservoir Plan (TARP), also known as "Deep Tunnel," is a system of deep, large diameter tunnels and vast reservoirs designed to reduce flooding, improve water quality in Chicago area waterways and protect Lake Michigan from pollution caused by sewer overflows. TARP captures and stores combined stormwater and sewage that would otherwise overflow from sewers into waterways in rainy weather. This stored water is pumped from TARP to water reclamation plants (WRPs) to be cleaned before being released to waterways. The four TARP tunnel systems are designed to flow to three huge reservoirs, and the system will have a capacity of 20.55 billion gallons when complete. That is 5,480 gallons for each person in its service area. One of the largest civil engineering projects on earth, TARP has been extremely effective and widely emulated since the initial tunnels went online in 1981.

The Challenge: Combined Sewer Overflows

Like many older cities, Chicago has a combined sewer system in which sanitary sewage from homes, offices and industries drain into the same pipes as stormwater. Most of these combined sewers were built before wastewater treatment existed and were designed to drain directly into rivers. In the early 20th century, the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago (MWRD) built large intercepting sewers to redirect sewers to newly built WRPs to clean the water. This system works well in dry weather, but in heavy rains the intercepting sewers and WRPs can reach capacity and result in combined sewer overflows (CSOs) to the river, impairing water quality and contributing to flooding.

Planning TARP

As development spread through the Chicago area in the early 20th century, paved surfaces directed increasing amounts of stormwater runoff into the combined sewer system. By the 1960s, Chicago area sewers were overflowing to the river more than 100 days a year and flooding had become a persistent issue. In 1967, officials of the MWRD, the state of Illinois, Cook County and the city of Chicago formed the Flood Control Coordinating Committee to find a solution to the region's flooding and water pollution problems caused by combined sewer overflows. The committee considered 50 alternatives and selected TARP as the most cost-effective approach to providing maximum benefits with minimal negative impacts. The most obvious solution, replacing combined sewers with separate storm and sanitary pipes, was determined to be too costly, disruptive to communities, and unable to provide flood relief. The MWRD officially adopted TARP as the area's plan to comply with federal and state water quality standards in 1972.

Construction and Status

TARP tunnel construction began in 1975. Construction was planned so that completed portions of the system could be put into operation as work continued elsewhere. The scale and depth of the project was unlike anything previously undertaken and required innovative approaches to tunneling. Newly-developed tunnel boring machines were used instead of traditional blasting to minimize vibrations, expedite progress, reduce damage to surrounding rock and lower costs for long sections of tunnels. To protect groundwater from leakage and protect the tunnels from water infiltration, cracks in the limestone

TARP Overall
- 20.55 billion gallons (BG) total capacity
- 109 miles of tunnels, 2.3 BG capacity
- Three reservoirs, 18.25 BG capacity
- 352 square mile service area
- 3.75 million people within service area
- Over $150 million annual flood damage savings
- 1.5 million structures protected from flooding
- Phase 1 (Tunnels) completed 2006
- Phase 2 (Reservoirs) to be completed 2029

Upper Des Plaines Tunnel System and Majewski Reservoir
- Service area: 14 square miles
- Tunnels: 0.07 BG capacity, 6.6 miles
- Gloria Alitto Majewski Reservoir: 0.35 BG capacity

Benefiting Communities: Arlington Heights Mount Prospect Des Plaines

Des Plaines Tunnel System
- Service Area: 32 square miles
- Tunnels: 0.4 BG capacity, 25.6 miles
- Reservoir: McCook Reservoir

Mainstream Tunnel System
- Service Area: 220 square miles
- Tunnels: 1.2 BG capacity, 40.5 miles
- Reservoir: McCook Reservoir

McCook Reservoir
- Capacity: 10 BG
- Service Area: 254.7 square miles
- Tunnel Systems: Mainstream and Des Plaines
- Completion Schedule: Stage 1, 2017 (3.5 BG); Stage 2, 2029 (6.5 BG)

Benefiting Communities:
- Bedford Park Lyons
- Berwyn Maywood
- Broadview Melrose Park
- Brookfield Morton Grove
- Chicago Niles
- Cicero Norridge
- Des Plaines North Riverside
- Elmwood Park Oak Park
- Evanston Park Ridge
- Forest Park River Forest
- Forest View River Grove
- Franklin Park Riverside
- Golf Schiller Park
- Harwood Heights Skokie
- Hometown Stickney
- Kenilworth Summit
- La Grange Western Springs
- La Grange Park Wilmette
- Lincolnwood

Thornton Reservoir and Calumet Tunnel System
- Service area: 91 square miles
- Tunnels: 0.63 BG capacity, 36.7 miles
- Thornton Reservoir: 7.9 BG capacity

Benefiting Communities:
- Blue Island Chicago
- Burnham
- Calumet City
- Calumet Park
- Chicago
- Drexmoor
- Dolton
- Harvey
- Lansing
- Markham
- Phoenix
- Posen
- Riverdale
- South Holland

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were sealed with grout and the tunnels were lined with concrete. The Upper Des Plaines Tunnel System, located near O’Hare Airport, went online in 1981 and the entire tunnel system was operational in 2006.

The smallest of the TARP reservoirs, Gloria Alitto Majewski Reservoir was completed in 1998. Work is currently underway on the two larger reservoirs, McCook and Thornton, which are being excavated from limestone by commercial quarry operators. Excavation of Thornton Reservoir is complete and it will be online in 2015. The first stage of McCook Reservoir is scheduled to go online in 2017. Partnering with commercial quarries has allowed these huge reservoirs to be completed economically and efficiently.

Benefits

TARP has been extremely successful in preventing flooding and pollution caused by combined sewer overflows and will be more effective when the larger reservoirs are online. Since the tunnels became operational, CSOs have been reduced from an average of 100 days per year to 50. As water quality has improved, our waterways have become home to increasingly healthy and diverse fish populations and popular destinations for recreation. Other cities around the world have taken note of TARP’s success and are now undertaking similar deep tunnel projects.