

Jones Island
Water Reclamation Facility Turns 100

Immediate Release – 6/25/2025 Contact: Bill Graffin, Public Information Manager, 414-225-2077

(Milwaukee, WI) – One of the first of its kind in the United States, the Jones Island Water Reclamation Facility celebrates 100 years of protecting public health and Lake Michigan through sustainable urban development, investments in clean-water infrastructure, and an unwavering dedication to environmental stewardship.

“We’re not doctors or surgeons, but our work cleaning wastewater plays a crucial role in saving lives by removing harmful pathogens, disease-causing organisms, and pollution from water,” said Kevin Shafer, Executive Director of the Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District (MMSD). “Wastewater treatment protects lakes, rivers, fish and wildlife, and ensures safe water for drinking, swimming and growing food.”

“We’re very fortunate that over a century ago, some very smart people had the vision to create the first version of Jones Island and fine tune new technology for cleaning wastewater. That process has been adopted by most urban areas across the country,” said Milwaukee Mayor Cavalier Johnson. “Milwaukee is recognized for world-class leadership in wastewater treatment, notably through MMSD, which continues to lead the way with cost-effective solutions for protecting public health and the source of drinking water for millions of people.”

The Jones Island Water Reclamation Facility officially opened in June of 1925 after an eleven-year experiment testing a new approach to wastewater treatment involving microscopic organisms, or “bugs”. Known as the activated sludge method that was developed in Europe, Jones Island became the largest treatment facility in the nation to harness nature to clean wastewater by having microorganisms feed on pollutants.

“Those same “bugs” started making Milwaukee famous for more than beer when, in 1926, workers at Jones Island turned the microorganisms into a fertilizer called Milorganite®. They started selling it across the country and popularity boomed,” said MMSD Commission Chair Jeff Stone. “The name Milorganite® stands for Milwaukee-organic-nitrogen, a fertilizer loved by master gardeners, golf-course superintendents and home lawn and garden aficionados. We currently cannot make enough of it to keep up with demand.”

From a pioneering facility in 1925 to a nationally recognized hub of innovation, the Jones Island Water Reclamation Facility serves hundreds of thousands of people, continuously assessing and updating infrastructure needs to accommodate population growth and development.

“It’s incredible how far we’ve advanced from the early days when sewage from homes and businesses would drain into the rivers without any attempts to clean the dirty water,” said Shafer. “In 1910, the Milwaukee Health Department reported 1,605 cases of typhoid and 171 typhoid deaths, making it clear the growing population needed a better solution than just dilution”.

In August 1974, the plant was designated a National Historic Civil Engineering Landmark by the American Society of Civil Engineers and cited as a unique and innovative facility.

"In 1979, Jones Island was placed on the National Register of Historic Places because of its historic leadership in developing what has become a leading sewage treatment method throughout the world," quoted from an April 1982 report for the Milwaukee Water Pollution Abatement Program.

In the last 31 years (since 1994), the Jones Island Water Reclamation Facility cleaned more than 1-trillion gallons of wastewater and stormwater.

***1-Trillion Gallons***

* **Would fill the home of the Brewers (American Family Field) more than 3,800 times, or once a day for 10.4 years.**
* **Equals 64.5 billion half-barrels (15.5 gallons each) of beer. Milwaukee’s Lakefront Brewery produces around 70,000 to 80,000 half barrels a year. At 75,000 half barrels, it would take them 860,000 years to get to 1-trillion gallons.**
* **1-trillion gallons would cover 88% of the State of Wisconsin with 1-inch of water.**
* **If you turned on a 2.5-gallon-per-minute showerhead until it got to 1-trillion gallons of water, it would take 761,000 years.**

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