

EPA wants action in push for localities' sewage upgrades

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The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has asked the Department of Justice to take action against the Hampton Roads Sanitation District and 11 localities for not moving fast enough to fix their leaky sewage systems.

Two years ago, the EPA instructed local leaders to develop a plan for curbing sewage overflows as part of a national push for controlling these bacteria-rich pollutants, which also can pose public health risks.

Local officials say they are surprised and disappointed by the request for Justice Department action, noting that they recently completed a draft agreement to upgrade sewage networks in the 11 affected cities and counties, including Chesapeake, Virginia Beach, Suffolk, Portsmouth and Isle of Wight County.

"Given what we've had to develop, I'd say we've been moving at a very rapid pace," said Ted G. Henifin, executive director of Hampton Roads Sanitation District, which treats most raw sewage generated in the region.

Henifin said he fears that the legal action may only delay the millions of dollars' worth of anticipated sewage work.

He hopes to learn more about the pending enforcement today when he meets with Justice Department officials in Washington. To date, Henifin has received no written complaint, only an EPA phone call several weeks ago.

Roy Seneca, an EPA spokesman in Philadelphia, declined to comment on the case Monday.

A memo released by Portsmouth City Hall said the decision to involve the Justice Department came from EPA headquarters in Washington, and not at the regional EPA office in Philadelphia.

State environmental regulators in Richmond also were caught off guard by the referral. They had been negotiating agreements with the 11 localities similar to ones in place in Norfolk and Hampton, which require the cities to modernize their aging sewage systems in phases.

"We've expressed our disappointment" to the EPA, said Bill Hayden, a spokesman for the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality.

By law, raw sewage should never escape from pipes and wash into streets and streams. However, it frequently happens anyway, usually after heavy rains, when flood waters enter sewer pipes through small cracks and overwhelm the system.

The problem, called "inflow and infiltration," affects many older cities in the United States. In recent years, the EPA has demanded upgrade agreements in Baltimore, Los Angeles, Houston, Atlanta, Miami, Cincinnati and New Orleans.

Hampton Roads is one of the last metropolitan areas on the EPA's list.

The regional sewage authority is spending about \$3 million to monitor the problem and expects the modernization program to take at least 15 years to complete, said Henifin, the executive director.

He said the bill should total hundreds of millions of dollars as crews and contractors replace cracked pipes with new lines and install other safeguards.

The 11 localities where upgrades will be required are: Chesapeake, Virginia Beach, Suffolk, Portsmouth, Isle of Wight County, Williamsburg, Newport News, Poquoson, Gloucester County, James City County and York County.

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