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Half a million gallons of raw sewage spilled in Chesapeake when sanitation pipe ruptured in May

By Katherine Hafner
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Steve Earley | The Virginian-Pilot

This is one of the retention ponds into which half a million gallons of sewage ran after a main break last r entrance to the Hunningdon Lakes neighborhood in Chesapeake, photographed on Friday, July 1, 2016.

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CHESAPEAKE

Environmental and health officials are still closely watching the effects of a major sewage spill on Memorial Day in which more than half a million gallons leaked into two neighborhood ponds.

A force main on Kempsville Road broke and sewage flowed into the retention ponds, which flank the entrance to Hunningdon Lakes.

Raw sewage. Grease in the banks. Solids floating in the water. The sanitary sewer leak, which came from a Hampton Roads Sanitation District pipe, was one of the worst in recent memory.

“I haven’t seen a spill like this in Chesapeake,” said Barbara Brumbaugh, Chesapeake’s environmental quality coordinator, who has worked with the city for 13 years.

More than 514,000 gallons leaked into two of the three neighborhood ponds where residents can fish. Roughly 17,000 gallons – around 3 percent – were recovered, according to Nancy Munnikhuisen, a sanitation district spokeswoman.

“The initial impacts were, as you can imagine, some odor, aesthetically not very pleasant,” Brumbaugh said.

Internal corrosion led the 30-inch iron pipe to fail, Munnikhuisen said in an email. Over the course of Memorial Day and early June, sanitation officials replaced 50 feet of pipe and some pipeline valves and worked to temporarily repave affected areas.

Weather permitting, officials were set to permanently restore pavement this weekend.

Because one of the ponds connects to the Atlantic Intracoastal Waterway, bacteria from the spill initially leaked into it, Brumbaugh said. State health officials put out a health advisory, which has since been lifted, warning people not to interact with the waterway because of potentially harmful bacteria.

Officials monitored the neighborhood ponds after the pipe break. High levels of fecal bacteria remained at first, as well as low levels of dissolved oxygen, which fish need to survive, Brumbaugh said.

No fish were killed.

A solar aerator is currently in place at one of the Hunningdon Lakes ponds to help raise oxygen levels, and officials are keeping their eyes on the area.

Officials with the state departments of health and environmental quality, city of Chesapeake and the regional sanitation district recently held a town hall meeting for neighborhood residents. They had been kept abreast of the situation through notices left on their front doors.

“The major concern was that it got into our ponds through the stormwater system that went out all the way down to the Intracoastal Waterway,” said Stuart Spatz, president of the Hunningdon Lakes Property Association. “People were worried a little bit,” but the meeting helped calm their apprehensions.

Spatz said the biggest change he saw in the days after the spill was the growth of algae, but that’s gone away after the sanitation district’s oxygenation and beautification efforts, which included adding mulch by the lakes.

Ken Newton, who has lived in the neighborhood for 26 years, said he didn’t realize the extent of the spill until a stench rose when the sewage was pumped from the nearby ponds.

“Of course it’s going to be bad,” Newton said of the smell, which he said dissipated quickly.

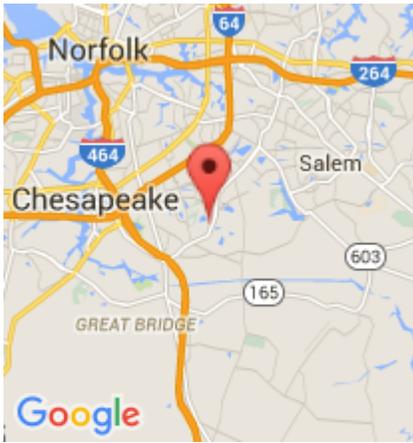
Chesapeake pipelines have had 35 sewer spills so far this year, not including the spill on Kempsville Road, according to Public Utilities Director David Jurgens. Last year, there were 35.

“It’s one of those things that happen, unfortunately,” Spatz said.

Brumbaugh said the concerning trends in the neighborhood’s ponds are starting to reverse for the better. In the meantime, she said, “we all hope it doesn’t happen again.”

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