

WSSC's sewer overflows decline after settlement

by Associated Press

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WASHINGTON — Aging water mains in the Maryland suburbs have had a series of spectacular breaks requiring firefighters to rescue people from cascading water, residents to boil tap water and crews to rip up roads to replace shattered pipes.

But the Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission spends almost twice as much money rehabilitating another kind of pipe that many people might prefer to forget about: nearly 5,400 miles of sewer pipe buried in Montgomery and Prince George's counties, some of it in such bad shape that the utility is under a court order to fix it.

WSSC is halfway through a 12-year plan required by a 2005 legal settlement with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the Maryland Department of the Environment and four environmental groups that sued the utility, accusing it of violating the Clean Water Act by having too many sewage overflows. Work required in the agreement, known as a consent decree, is aimed at eliminating untreated sewage that rushes out of manholes, backs up into basements and spews out of pumping stations and treatment plants during power failures.

WSSC officials say they have already seen dramatic results from stepped-up sewer pipe inspections and repairs, as well as increased monitoring of grease buildup in pipes, particularly in those that connect to restaurants. From 2006 to 2010, the volume of sewage escaping pipes dropped from 985,000 gallons to 68,000 gallons. During the same period, sewage overflowing at WSSC pumping stations and treatment plants has fallen from 13.4 million gallons to about a half-million gallons last year. Backups into basements have dropped less, from 1,023 incidents to 939.

A spokesman for the Maryland Department of the Environment, which enforces the consent decree with the EPA, said WSSC has met all requirements so far. WSSC paid a \$1.1 million penalty for Clean Water Act violations committed prior to the agreement and about \$300,000 in fines for sewer overflows since it went into effect, said spokesman Jay Apperson.

Environmental groups that sued WSSC give the utility high marks for abiding by the 154-page consent decree that details how WSSC must report sewage spills and reduce them.

"I do feel like they're taking it seriously," said Brent Bolin, advocacy director for the Anacostia Watershed Society, one of the plaintiffs in the WSSC lawsuit. "They've been a good partner. I wish it was going faster, but we try to be reasonable about the funding limitations they're operating under."

More important, some say, the legal settlement has forced WSSC to pay more attention to its aging infrastructure.

"It's too bad they had to be sued for it, but it's working," said Larry J. Silverman, an environmental lawyer who helped negotiate the consent decree on behalf of the Anacostia Watershed Society. "I think it's brought about a cultural change within the organization to realize their job is to maintain a system built over the past 70 years. Before, I think they saw their job as keeping rates as low as possible and accommodating developers."

Public health issue

WSSC officials recently began meeting with local environmental groups to discuss plans to reinforce weakened sewer pipes in Rock Creek and Sligo Creek, beginning in Rock Creek next summer. Crews also will cover pipes that became unearthed after decades of erosion caused by storm water rushing off asphalt and into the stream valleys.

Customers are paying for WSSC's work, which is estimated to total \$500 million. Environmentalists say the consent decree gave public officials political cover to hike rates 6.5 to 9 percent annually in each of the past five years, after almost a decade of keeping rates flat or increasing them 2 to 3 percent. WSSC officials say they deferred maintenance on underground pipes to save money when budgets were tight.

The legally required sewer work will eat up 20 percent of WSSC's capital budget this fiscal year. The \$115 million allotted to the sewer system compares with \$66.7 million budgeted to inspect, maintain and replace drinking water pipes — work that is not mandated by a court order.

"If you're polluting streams and basements, it's a public health issue," said WSSC spokesman Jim Neustadt. "Infrastructure has not been given the attention it needed. We had sewer maintenance programs, but the work wasn't getting done fast enough. The consent decree forced us to ramp up."

WSSC is one of 65 utilities in the United States operating under a consent decree to reduce sewer overflows, according to the EPA. Others include DC Water, which is six years into a 25-year plan required by a 2005 consent decree aimed at reducing sewage spills into Rock Creek and the Potomac and Anacostia rivers.

Most WSSC sewer pipes are 40 to 70 years old, and some have hit the century mark. Although sewer pipes do rupture from old age, WSSC officials say, they are most vulnerable to spilling sewage when they get clogged. The primary culprits: thick tree roots that muscle their way into pipes through cracks and the buildup of hardened grease.

Much of the consent decree work done in the past six years has focused on teaching residents and businesses to dispose of grease, oils and fats without pouring them down drains. WSSC launched a "Can the Grease" marketing campaign and hired a half-dozen additional inspectors to monitor the grease abatement efforts of 7,425 restaurants, schools, nursing homes and other sites with commercial kitchens, WSSC officials said. Businesses must pay \$325 for an annual discharge permit based on inspections.

The utility has inspected more than 3,000 miles of sewer pipe for cracks, defects, tree roots and grease. WSSC officials said they also have installed new equipment at pumping stations and treatment plants, where sewage can spew out when power fails or the facility reaches capacity.

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