

MacRo Report Blog

Raw sewage enters Carroll Creek

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Enough raw sewage to fill 388 large gasoline tanker trucks flowed into Carroll Creek and sent health department officials into overdrive Sunday.

The Frederick Department of Public Works is still investigating why 3.5 million gallons of untreated sewage entered the creek from its wastewater treatment plant at 100 Plant Road off Gas House Pike.

Drinking water in Frederick is safe, authorities said, but the creek is no place to be for now.

Until further notice, people should avoid the creek downstream of the plant, said Alicia Evangelista of the Frederick County Health Department. Recreational activities such as boating and fishing should wait until the state and city determine that the water is free from contamination, she said.

Pets should stay away, too, and anyone who comes into contact with the water should rinse off, she said.

Rockville and Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission water departments downstream were advised to monitor the water coming into their treatment plants, Jay Apperson, of the Maryland Department of Environment, said by telephone Monday.

The problem started at about 5:30 p.m. Sunday, when the main source of electrical power -- and the required backup power source -- failed at Frederick's treatment plant, Apperson said.

It took nine hours to get a backup generator running, according to Marc Stachowski, the city's deputy director of public works.

If the cause was preventable, Frederick may have to pay a fine for the sewage overflow, Apperson said. His department is working with the city to figure out how the overflow happened and how to prevent it from happening again, he said.

The state assesses fines "unless the owner or operator of the system can clearly demonstrate that the overflow was beyond their control and in spite of taking all reasonable steps to properly operate, maintain and improve sewer system infrastructure," Apperson said.

The penalty ranges from \$1,000 to \$32,500 per day for each overflow.

"We are concerned about fines," Stachowski stated in an email.

Stachowski said the investigation into the cause may take weeks.

Of 746 sanitary sewage overflows reported in a state database for 2010, most were less than 200,000 gallons. Baltimore City, which reported 272 overflows, had one 30 million-gallon overflow caused by heavy rains. The U.S. Army reported a 2.5 million-gallon overflow caused by precipitation.

Frederick city reported no overflows in 2010.

Allegany County had 52 overflow reports in 2010; those between Jan. 1 and Feb. 2 added up to 2.4 million gallons. An Allegany overflow on Feb. 28 was 1.5 million gallons, and one on March 10 was also 1.5 million gallons, according to state records.

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