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Equipment failure sends raw sewage into Hempstead Bay

BY JENNIFER SMITH

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An equipment failure early yesterday at Nassau County's Cedar Creek sewage treatment plant in Wantagh released 51,000 gallons of raw sewage, some of which spilled into East Hempstead Bay, where long-closed shellfish beds had been reopened recently.

The malfunction occurred overnight, sometime between 10 p.m. and 1 a.m., said Nassau Public Works Commissioner Raymond Ribeiro.

State environmental officials said such a large spill was unusual for the plant, particularly as containment systems should have kept effluent from reaching the bay. "This is the biggest one we can recall," said William Spitz, regional water manager for the state Department of Environmental Conservation.

The DEC has closed shellfish beds in East Hempstead Bay between the Meadowbrook and Wantagh Parkways through Nov. 13 to prevent human consumption of contaminated shellfish. The closure includes 500 acres of shellfishing areas in the northern part of East Bay just opened in October to year-round harvest, and another several hundred acres.

County engineers estimated that about half of the spilled sewage was captured by three floor drains inside the plant. But a fourth drain was clogged, causing the rest to flow outside and into a catch basin that discharges into Cedar Creek - and ultimately, the bay.

Officials said once the spill was detected, plant operators rerouted the sewage flow to another unit and pumped out the outdoor catch basin.

The volume of effluent that did reach local waters "is probably not significant enough to have any impact," Ribeiro said.

Still, some critics said the accident highlighted deteriorating conditions at Cedar Creek. The largest of Nassau's sewage plants, the facility discharges 58 million to 60 million gallons of treated sewage daily to the Atlantic.

"I'm concerned about the overall lack of maintenance, and the county's refusal to acknowledge it," said Mark Salerno, a Wantagh resident and member of a citizens' committee that monitors the facility.



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Ribeiro defended the plant's maintenance program and said the county was preparing a report on the incident for the DEC, which issues the facility's pollution-discharge permits.

Spitz said it was unlikely that the spill indicated larger problems at the plant, but that the DEC would probably inspect the facility for "potential pathways" for sewage to reach the bay.

The initial breakdown occurred at the plant's grit tank, where sand and gravel are removed from the effluent and diverted to a trash bin, Ribeiro said. An equipment failure sent sewage there as well, causing the bin to overflow.

Plant operators notified the DEC of the spill about 3 a.m. - within the required two-hour reporting window - and alerted county health officials soon after. "There is no public health threat," Nassau Health Department spokeswoman Cynthia Brown said.

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