

3 million gallons of sewage enter Missouri river after city waits to repair sewer line

September 30 2009, By Karen Dillon

Kansas City Water Services workers decided to wait over the weekend before fixing a broken sewer line that eventually spilled 3 million gallons of raw sewage, officials said Tuesday.

The state has cited the water department for the spill, and city officials said Tuesday they were launching an internal investigation.

"We are going to relook at what happened and make sure that was the right judgment call," said Curtis G. Braden, manager of the water department. "We are going to be looking at our processes."

But Braden, who noted that rain played a role in the delay Friday night, stopped short of saying mistakes had been made.

"I won't know that until I get through with the investigation," Braden told McClatchy Newspapers.

Another water official described the spill as "major."

The raw sewage -- equal to five Olympic-sized swimming pools -- spilled into a tributary of the Blue River about a mile from the Kansas City Zoo. The Blue River runs through parts of southern and eastern Kansas City.

City officials said the broken sewer pipe was repaired by early Monday night.

Later that night, the Missouri Department of Natural Resources issued a notice of violation against the city, saying the city had violated the Missouri Clean Water law and other water regulations.

A Natural Resources Department inspection report said that after water department workers discovered the broken sewer line Friday, they made several mistakes:

City workers allowed 3 million gallons of raw sewage to spill into Hart Grove Creek, which flows into the Blue River.

The workers apparently took no action to reroute the sewage around the tributary.

Workers made no attempt to notify the department's 24-hour spill line that a major discharge had taken place.

City officials made no attempt to notify the public or downstream users who could be affected by the spill.

It wasn't until noon on Tuesday, four days after the spill was first detected, that the Kansas City Water Services put out a notice to the public.

Both the zoo and a downstream golf course were notified to take precautions.

By Tuesday afternoon, workers were still cleaning up the site and taking water samples as a thick odor of sewage hung in the air.

The effect of the spill was not immediately clear, city officials said.

But Ken Midkiff, an expert on Missouri water quality, said the levels of

E. coli were probably astronomical. Anyone who came into contact with the water with their hands or through fishing was probably at risk, he said.

"It's inexcusable for the water department to have allowed it to keep flowing," Midkiff said. "They knew there was a problem and didn't do anything. They shouldn't have left until the problem was solved."

[Water](#) department workers were notified of a sewer odor Friday morning by a security guard working near Marion Park Drive. Workers found two breaks and fixed one. They decided to wait to fix the second.

A city worker called the Natural Resources Department regional office on Friday and left a voice mail reporting the spill to Robert Betts, a state inspector, according to the inspection report.

But Betts had already left the office for the weekend, and city workers made no attempt to contact the state's spill hot line, officials said.

Workers did not return to the site Saturday or Sunday because of concern about their safety, Braden said. The site of the break is rocky and could have been slippery, he said.

On Monday morning, Betts returned the call and asked if the break had been fixed. But workers were unable to answer the question, Betts said in the report. Betts then went to the site.

The department ordered the city to begin sampling numerous locations along the stream and the Blue River.

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