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Cary spill totals 7.9 million gallons

The town raises its estimate of the sewage that polluted Swift Creek and two lakes

DAVID BRACKEN AND TOBY COLEMAN,
Staff Writers

Cary now reports that about 7.9 million gallons of sewage spilled into Swift Creek while engineers struggled to deal with a broken pipe at a pump station.

The revised total makes the spill the third-largest in the Triangle in the past decade. The spill has closed Lake Wheeler and Lake Benson to boaters and fishermen for a week. Raleigh officials continue to test both lakes for bacteria but say the earliest they could open is Saturday.

Earlier Cary had estimated the spill, which began last Friday night and ended Wednesday morning, at just over 3 million gallons. Officials said Thursday that the fleet of tanker trucks the town brought in to haul waste around the trouble spot could not keep up.

"The trucks didn't haul all the waste," said Susan Moran, a Cary spokeswoman. "We were

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BIGGEST N.C. SEWAGE SPILLS SINCE 1995

1. Roanoke Rapids, 14 million gallons, September 1999
2. Raleigh, 9 million gallons, December 2002
3. Laurinburg, 8 million gallons, February 1998
4. Durham, 8 million gallons, May 2006
5. Cary, 7.9 million gallons, June 2006

N.C. DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENT AND
NATURAL RESOURCES, TOWN OF CARY

TIMELINE

able to divert 68 percent, but not all of it."

The potential damage to two popular recreation spots has angered nearby residents and regular users of the lakes. The spill started after mudslides caved in a hole contractors had dug in an expansion project at the pump station.

A look at other large sewage spills in the Triangle over the past decade shows that they occur for many reasons and that operators are rarely fined for problems they may encounter.

Just last month, the city of Durham reported an 8-million-gallon sewage spill. A 21-inch sewer line collapsed in a remote area behind the Nello Teer Quarry, and officials didn't find out until a resident reported it 13 days later.

Susan Massengale, the public information officer for the state's Division of Water Quality, said the agency agreed with Durham's conclusion that most of the sewage spilled into a wooded area and only a small amount reached the Eno River.

JUNE 14: Remnants of Tropical Storm Alberto flood the Swift Creek pump station on Holly Springs Road. A hole where the town plans to put an addition to the pump station fills with water.

JUNE 16: Engineers monitoring the pump station project for Cary say a wall in the excavated hole is crumbling. They send the contractor, Laughlin-Sutton Construction Company, an e-mail saying that the "slope failure ... presents a concern for the ongoing work."

JUNE 23: About 5:15 p.m., after a heavy rain, a wall of the excavated hole collapses and twists an underground pipe out of place. Cary's emergency system begins to call town utility workers.

JUNE 23: About 7:30 p.m., sewage begins to spill into Swift Creek at a rate of 200,000 gallons an hour as workers scramble to reconnect the pipe.

JUNE 24: In the morning, Raleigh parks officials decide to close Lake Benson and Lake Wheeler, two recreational lakes fed by Swift Creek, until bacteria tests can be done. They have remained closed to boaters and anglers since.

JUNE 24: About noon, crews reattach pipe to pump station. The fix doesn't hold, and the pipe blows off again. Sewage shoots across Holly Springs Road momentarily, then resumes spilling into Swift Creek.

JUNE 24: That evening, to try to stem the spill, Cary officials hire a fleet of tanker trucks to haul sewage. Truckers pick up wastewater at the pumpstation, drive a couple of miles downstream and pour it back into the sewer system through open manholes.

JUNE 25: Cary's leaders determine that they cannot replace the pump station's broken pipe because the soil around it is too unstable. They begin searching for temporary pumps that will allow them to pipe sewage around the pump station while they build a new pipe.

JUNE 28: At 5:15 a.m., the sewage spill ends as the town starts piping sewage through a temporary system that bypasses the broken Swift Creek pump station.

TOWN OF CARY

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Steve Miller, assistant superintendent for Durham's water and sewer maintenance division, said beaver dams nearby helped contain the spill. The cleanup effort has involved pumping out the waste, removing soil and checking the rest of the line for problems. The Division of Water Quality has yet to determine what action it will take against Durham, Massengale said.

Other large spills in the Triangle have been caused by severe weather. The largest in the past decade occurred in December 2002 in Raleigh. An ice storm cut power to one of the city's lift stations, which ultimately caused 9 million gallons of sewage to reach Walnut Creek. In March 1998, a pump station in southwest Durham County failed and quickly flooded with sewage, leading to a 6-million-gallon spill.

Glen Whisler, the Durham County engineer, said the pump station was in a flood-prone area and has been closed. Whisler said his biggest concern is the collection of fats and grease in sewer pipes, which reduces their capacity and causes blockages.

In September 2005, a deer carcass stuck in a sewer line in Clayton's system, resulting in a 1.8-million-gallon sewage spill into Little Creek. The town wasn't fined.

"We're not really sure how it got in there," said Byron Poelman, Clayton's public works superintendent.

In recent years, Massengale said, the state has tried to tie regular maintenance requirements to its permit process for sewer

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operators. As sewer lines age, she said, they become more susceptible to damage from shifting ground or tree roots.

As for fines, Massengale said that in the past, the division didn't levy fines if an operator responded quickly, because it was trying to encourage the reporting of spills.

Last year, the state took the rare action of fining both Elizabeth City and Wilmington more than \$50,000 because of sewage spills. Massengale said the division is starting to demand that sewer systems do more to address problems before spills bring them to light.

Staff writer David Bracken can be reached at 829-4548 or dbracken@newsobserver.com.

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