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Spill stains Raleigh waters

Flow unreported and long-lasting

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Boaters and fishers have to stay off Big Lake and Sycamore Lake at Umstead State Park. Signs say they're closed. Dog walkers and hikers are being warned away from the shores, too.

And along three miles of Sycamore Creek, from one of Raleigh's fastest-growing urban corners to the tree-covered heart of the Triangle's central park, utility workers in tall black rubber boots are wading through a stinking mix of raw sewage, water and mud, laboring to limit the damage of the city's biggest sewage spill in 2 1/2 years.

Although the estimated 3.3 million-gallon spill is thought to have lasted more than a month, no neighbors reported it.

A crew of about 20 city utility workers with hulking pump trucks and long orange hoses sprays the low-running creek's banks with fresh water, then pumps the murky mixture into the city's sewage system for treatment. Some of the men stir the sludge with their boots to get it out.

Last week they sucked out a 300-foot-long mass of sewage solids up to 3 feet deep that had backed up behind a fallen tree and other natural debris in the creek. The dam helped prevent further pollution downstream.

The stricken creek feeds Big Lake and Sycamore Lake, then flows into Crabtree Creek.

The lakes will remain closed until water testing shows they're safe for fishing and boating.

Along Sycamore Creek's banks, spring's verdant splurge of leaves and blossoms conceals the malodorous muck below, where several dozen fish have died and dragonflies and other insect larvae in the creek are doomed.

"It's a bad one," said Tom Johnson, supervisor of the city crew and a 20-year utility veteran. "But it's cleaning up real good."

Preliminary water testing at Umstead's lakes wasn't as bad as initially feared, city and state officials said Tuesday.

Just who caused the 35-day spill -- presumed to be a developer or construction contractor with some explaining to do -- is a mystery the city is trying to solve.

Whoever it was lost track of a temporary sewer plug sealing a new 8-inch pipe. The plug came off and washed into a 15-inch sewer main, where it got stuck with gravel and other debris and clogged the line.



William Prevatt, an employee of the city of Raleigh, stirs muck from the bottom of Sycamore Creek so the hose crew behind him can flush the stream. On Tuesday, they were working on a stretch of the creek near Interstate 540.

The plug didn't have a tag attached, as it should have, stating who installed it.

The state could fine Raleigh, which in turn could charge the plug's installer -- if the city can flush him out.

If it does, the city will levy the maximum fine of \$17,500 (\$500 for each day) plus the cleanup cost of several thousand dollars, spokeswoman Jayne Kirkpatrick said.

Spill went unreported

The spill was the city's biggest since an ice storm in December 2002 knocked out power to a sewage pump station, releasing about 9 million gallons.

Upstream from the spill are businesses along Leesville Road and thousands of residents of Harrington Grove and other neighborhoods in a booming area.

The sewage poured unseen out of a manhole on a sewer line next to Sycamore Creek about half a mile north of ACC Boulevard. It flowed into the creek unreported, if not undetected.

Nearby residents, business workers and weekend riders of all-terrain vehicles noticed the smell, Johnson said.

"Unfortunately, nobody called us," he said. "If somebody had called a long time ago, it wouldn't have been near as bad."

Two city inspectors conducting a routine check of the sewer easement along Sycamore Creek noticed the spill Thursday, and the cleanup began within hours.

"There's no telling how long it might have gone on before somebody called," Johnson said.

The cleanup is expected to last the rest of the week.

"What they've done so far looks good," said Judy Garrett, an environmental chemist at the state Department of Environment and Natural Resources who inspected the work Monday. "It was pretty nasty."

At the cleanup site, two pump trucks drown out the roar of airplanes soaring overhead after takeoff at nearby Raleigh-Durham International Airport.

Chris Hatley, general manager of Bordeaux Limousines on nearby J. Richard Drive, said he saw the pump trucks Tuesday and wondered what was up.

He said he hadn't smelled the sewage until he walked down to the creek Tuesday evening to check it out.

"It smells unbelievable," he said by cell phone as he stood near the polluted creek.

Safety concerns

Hatley said he wished the city had notified him and other nearby businesses that rely on well water.

"That's a huge health concern," he said. "Honest to goodness, you'd think they'd let people know."

Today, he said, he'll probably order bottled water for the office.

Umstead Park Ranger Keith Neelson said the lakes might reopen by the weekend. Until then, trails around the area remain open.

"We're taking every precaution," he said. "It's all a question of public safety."

Meanwhile, Reedy Creek Lake at the park's southern end is open to fishing for crappie, bluegill, catfish and bass, he said.

No one has reported problems with fish caught in the lakes during the spill, Nealson said.

And everyone warned away has taken it well, he said.

"People have been pretty understanding," he said. "There's some concern about it."

Among builders a few miles north, too, no doubt.

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