

Storm triggers Big Howard Sewage Spill

By Timothy B. Wheeler, The Baltimore Sun

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Sandy knocked out power to Howard County's "water reclamation" plant in Savage, causing 20 to 25 million gallons of untreated but rain-diluted human waste to spill into the Little Patuxent River, a branch of one of the Chesapeake Bay's most degraded tributaries. County Executive Ken Ulman called the outage "unacceptable" and called for a "full audit" of how to prevent future overflows.

Another big storm, another big sewage spill — this time in Howard County.

Sandy knocked out power to the county's "water reclamation" plant in Savage late Monday night, causing 20 million to 25 million gallons of untreated but rain-diluted human waste to spill into the Little Patuxent River, a branch of one of the Chesapeake Bay's most degraded tributaries.

The overflow, which lasted a little more than 12 hours, appeared to be the largest of 19 sewage spills of various sizes reported from around the state in the wake of the superstorm that sideswiped Maryland on its way to landfall in southern New Jersey. Jay Apperson, spokesman for the Maryland Department of the Environment, said he had no details on the others but believed they were smaller.

The spills triggered by Sandy pale by comparison with the 100-million-gallon rupture of a sewer main into the lower Patapsco River following Hurricane Irene last year. But they were another reminder of the fragility of infrastructure vital to restoring the bay and keeping local waters safe for swimming and wading.

Apperson said the Howard overflow did not affect any drinking-water supplies, and he noted that health officials had warned the public to stay clear of the Little Patuxent until bacteria in the river dissipates.

Howard County Executive Ken Ulman said the spill did "minimal" health and environmental harm, but vowed to conduct a "full audit" to see what could be done to avoid similar overflows.

The sewage spilled into the Little Patuxent was greatly diluted by the storm's heavy rainfall, Ulman said in a telephone interview. He added that the county's health officer, Dr. Maura Rossman, had assured him the wastewater contained "less than 1 percent" human waste. Rossman said in a separate phone interview that the bacteria levels in water samples taken Tuesday weren't immediately available.

Until this storm, Ulman said, the county had what had seemed adequate safeguards in place to keep the sewage plant operating. The facility, which treats the waste of most Howard residents, was served by two separate power lines on different circuits. The facility has lost one of its power lines a couple of times before, the executive said, but never both at the same time.

A falling tree took out one power line feeding into the plant about 8 p.m. Monday, according to Rob Gould, a Baltimore Gas and Electric Co. spokesman. Another tree severed the other line around 11 p.m.

The plant does have backup generators, Ulman said. But the generators are just for dealing with brief outages and can't handle the facility's daily load of 50 million gallons of wastewater, he said.

"This is obviously a potential health concern," he said. "It's also an environmental concern, which is a priority."

Sewage spills this time of year likely have less impact on water quality than in warmer weather, said William Dennison, a vice president of the University of Maryland Center for Environmental Science. Fish aren't spawning in the fall, underwater grasses have gone dormant, and even algae aren't terribly active as water temperature cools.

"It's so late in the season, if you're going to have a bad event, this is the time to have it," he said.

Even so, Dennison said, the Patuxent watershed, including the Little Patuxent, scored an "F" as one of two bay tributaries in failing environmental health on the university's most recent report card. The other was the Elizabeth River in Virginia.

Patuxent Riverkeeper Fred Tutman said the river has been plagued by spills, and he noted that the county is required under a 2010 consent agreement with state environmental regulators to work to prevent sewage overflows.

After spilling more than 1 million gallons of sewage in 2008, overflows from county sewer lines and facilities have been minimal for the past three years. This year before Sandy, though, the county had reported releasing more than 100,000 gallons of sewage overall. State regulators fined the county \$5,600 last year for overflows from October 2010 to March 2011. Apperson said he was unable to furnish additional information on the county's compliance with the agreement because state offices were closed for the storm.

"They're likely to get a pass from everybody, including MDE, because it's a storm event," Tutman said of county officials handling of this week's massive spill. But he added, "Probably, if they'd had their act together, it would have been less severe."

Ulman said he spoke with BGE President Kenneth DeFontes Jr. just before Sandy hit to stress that maintaining power to the county's treatment plant was "our top priority."

BGE spokesman Gould said the restoring power to the plant was a priority as well for the utility, but repair crews had to wait several hours for high winds to abate so they could work safely on the overhead wires.

Ulman said that while it may not be possible to prevent any damage from extreme storms, he

considered the power failure "unacceptable." He vowed to do what it takes to see such a breakdown doesn't happen again.

"Clearly there's an expense side to it, but when it's a piece of infrastructure that's this critical, we've got to look very seriously at upgrading the power capabilities there," he said.

"If there is any kind of showing up the plant from a generation perspective," BGE's Gould said, "that is something we'd be happy to talk to the county about. But that is something they'd have to make the decision on."

Baltimore Sun Media Group reporter Sara Toth contributed to this article.

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