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Pipeline rupture dumps raw sewage into laguna

Effluent killing fish, fills air with foul odor; officials worry spill will reach Russian River

August 8, 2002

By MARY CALLAHAN
THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

A 14-inch Sebastopol sewer pipe burst, dumping raw waste into the Laguna de Santa Rosa, city officials said Wednesday.

The pipe apparently broke overnight Tuesday and an undetermined amount of sewage spilled before the pipeline was shut down for repairs.

Dozens of fish were killed and a foul odor spread from the spill site near the Highway 12 bridge over the laguna on the east edge of Sebastopol.

"Any time you have a raw sewage spill, we think it's a serious matter, and it appears to be a large amount that was spilled," said John Short, a senior engineer with the North Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board.

Crews from several agencies cleared brush to get at the leak, assess the damage and begin cleanup efforts.

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Pumps were set up to extract contaminated water from the laguna for disposal in a channel near a public walking path, Sebastopol Public Works Superintendent Richard Emig said.

The city pumping plant was shut down, and as many as six container trucks spent the afternoon trucking sewage to the regional treatment plant on Llano Road, bypassing the broken pipeline.

Residents were asked to flush toilets and use showers, dishwashers, washing machines and the like only when necessary, Fire Chief John Zanzi said.

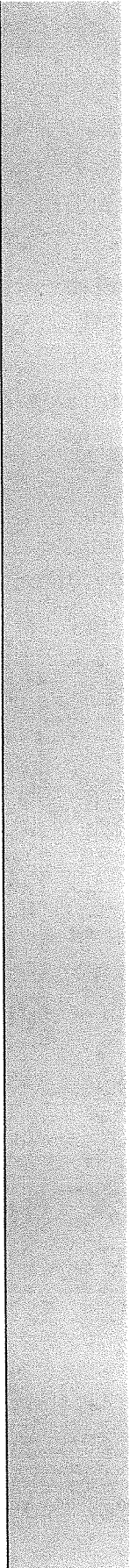
The laguna is a network of wetlands and creeks that lead to the Russian River. Though water moves through it slowly and a natural dam helped contain the spill, Short said at least some of the waste was believed to have flowed through.

The situation was being monitored by the state Department of Fish and Game, as well as the water quality board and the county health department, both of which were expected to continue testing water in the laguna and the Russian River.

The broken line transports an average of 650,000 to 700,000 gallons of raw sewage each day to the regional treatment plant, Assistant Superintendent of Public Works Walt Bramwell said, but officials did not believe that much had spilled.

Workers at the city pumping station on Morris Street discovered the leak after a morning check of gauges indicated the pumps weren't working as hard as usual, Bramwell said.

They walked the line, which is buried five to seven feet deep where it crosses the laguna and Highway 12, and found an area saturated with waste just south of the highway and east of the laguna, he



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said.

Crews spent all day excavating, and finally exposed the leak around 5 p.m.

A rectangular section of the reinforced fiberglass pipe measuring about four by 12 inches had simply torn off, Building Official Todd Cunningham said.

It was patched temporarily around 8 p.m. and the pumping station was restarted.

City officials said they ultimately would replace perhaps a 40-foot section of the pipeline. Emig said he hoped the city would find the funding -- expected to be several million dollars -- to replace all the old line in and around the laguna.

The existing pipe, installed in 1979, appeared to have ruptured spontaneously, he and others said. They also said the city is among several parties to a lawsuit against its manufacturer, claiming the pipe material is deficient.

Officials noted the line is subjected to significant pressure, carries a highly corrosive substance and is buried in wet ground. "There are a lot of factors being applied to this pipe that might lessen its lifetime," Short said.

It will be several days, Bramwell said, before personnel had a chance to backtrack and find out what time the pipe ruptured. They should also be able to calculate roughly how much was dumped, he said.

Short said the fish that died likely suffered from lack of oxygen, which is quickly consumed by bacteria in the sewage. Though crews were attempting to restore the oxygen with aerators, water quality personnel had seen many stressed and struggling fish, in addition to those already dead.

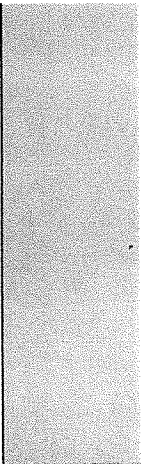
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"We would imagine the kill would continue, and wouldn't be surprised if all the fish in this pooled area were killed off," Short said.

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