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SPECIAL REPORT - ENVIRONMENT & ECOLOGY 11-5-2005

Major spills affect local bays

For a successful technology, reality must take precedence over public relations, for Nature cannot be fooled. ~Richard P. Feynman

By Kathleen Byrne-Barrantes

On September 29, the City of Poulsbo reported a 532,621-gallon spill of raw sewage discharged from a 4-5 inch hole in the force main of the 4,000 ft iron ductile pipe that runs along the beach between Lindvig Road and the Marine Science Center into the north end of Liberty Bay.

This may have broken a near 10-year state record... if not for the fact that the undiscovered leak occurred over a period of 21 days.

Upon report of the spill, however, a well coordinated multi-agency spill response action followed, resulting in a no-contact order and shellfish closure from the Kitsap County Health District (KCHD). The city crews worked to contain the flow from the Lindvig pump station with pumpers before Kitsap County arrived with larger capacity pumpers and provided the track hoe, and Sprint brought in timbers so that heavy equipment could get across the mud during low tide, and the leak was repaired before the tide came in.

"I am extremely proud of our Public Works crews who could assist the City in these kinds of emergencies. They just go to remind us that accidents do happen and can cause damage to our fragile environment," replied County Commissioner Chris Endresen.

Local activist and "town crier" Bill Austin sprang into action getting the word out to local neighbors and businesses at the head of the bay after the KCHD's Stuart Whitford notified the Liberty Bay Foundation's network coordinator. "I could see from above, the little City trucks moving about, then it was like the Calvary had arrived and the County's big trucks and teams jumped in."

"Based on the hours of operation noted at the pump stations at Lindvig Way and the Marine Science Center, the sewer force main would have been leaking sometime between Sept. 9 and Sept. 29," said Poulsbo Public Works Director Jeff Lincoln as he addressed the council on Oct. 5 to reveal the results of the City's investigation.

The Liberty Bay Foundation (LBF), in a letter to the City read by Councilman Ed Stern at that meeting, voiced concerns about that section of pipe after reporting smells in the vicinity during their monitoring efforts a year before and previous samples of the outfall at Bayview Auto that regularly had high fecal coliform counts. Kitsap County Health District's Stuart Whitford had responded to the LBF concerns in an April 4, 2005 e-mail, stating that no dye had been observed from the dye test introduced into the system two weeks before. "As mentioned we're in a holding pattern right now while the city continues to investigate the source of this contamination," Whitford wrote. "We've offered our help and will do so when

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Lincoln also reported the need to improve its ability to gather and analyze data from their systems, such as a record of how long a pump has been running and changes in operation that could be an indication of potential problems. However, while the city's monitoring software recorded the data properly, the city lacks the staff to review those results and take advantage of those options. "The public works department has a year's worth of data that needs to be put into the system, and this would require somebody at a workstation half a day, every day," he said.

Stern expressed his appreciation for the city's use of technology to improve its systems, but cautioned that. "You can have all the technology, but if you don't have the people to analyze it, it won't work," Stern then added "If the City is serious about repairing the problem, then perhaps it needs to create the support for city crews to protect the environment."

"After the large amount of sewage was reported just 150 yards north last March of this year, we were disappointed that the city was satisfied that no source was identified and left it at that," the statement from the LBF read. The LBF had also requested that the pipeline be pressure tested and samples be taken on a regular basis at that time, which wasn't done.

While Lincoln stated that the two incidents aren't related, experts such as Don Anderson, Lemolo Citizens Club member, engineer and former director of NUWC Keyport Environmental programs, believes it is along the same terrain and too close to be ruled out.

Lincoln said that the pipe was probably scraped which led to corrosion causing the leak. The iron ductile pipe was installed in 1978 and constantly saturated due to tidal flows in the saltwater bay.

Old lines with deteriorating connections and possible breaks can leak sewage into surrounding soils and waterways. There are a number of iron ductile pipes in use throughout the country with varying degrees of success, particularly in the salt water environment. While methods have been employed to encase, mortarize, and apply cathodic protection to inhibit corrosion, these have not been entirely successful. Some mains have failed and required a fix such as slip-lining with a plastic pipe, as in the case of a local Kitsap water main, after just 13 years. The Poulsbo line, installed nearly 30 years ago without the benefits of modern technological advances, was encased in cement and sits in salt water along the mud bay.

In May of 2001, the City of Blaine pressure tested their underwater 14" force main, installed in 1996, which carries untreated sewage across the harbor to their treatment facility. Longer term concerns with the Blaine sewage collection system were due to recent findings that there were problems with the cathodic protection of the underwater sewer force main component. Monitoring by both the state and local efforts in Drayton Harbor had identified leaks in the line as a source of fecal pollution. The 2700 feet of line, which is constructed of ductile iron and has 150 joints, passed the pressure testing at 100psi in 2002 and again in 2003.

The City has continued to conduct a pressure test on their underwater force main on an annual basis. This annual pressure test has now been incorporated as a requirement in the City's National Pollution Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) Permit.

The recent spill was nearly two years after the last major sewage spill broke a 7-year state record when more than 350,000 gallons of raw sewage were dumped into area waters into the south end of Liberty and Ne-si-ka Bays. A pump at the Brownsville treatment station failed that day. "On Sept. 16, 2003 during a routine test at Kitsap County's Brownsville sewage station, a coupling failed, that resulted in a pipe separation. The crews worked to contain the spill but a decision had to be made and it eventually was drained to Liberty Bay," said Rick Gagnon of the Kitsap County Public Works Department. "At the time it was the only choice... we had to choose between letting it all go at Keyport, in fact did let 20,000 gallons go there, but it would take out the road and that could have prevented further action," explained Gagnon.

The 2003 sewage spill into Liberty Bay prompted the Lemolo Citizens Club (LCC) meeting with city and county representatives representing about 90 families in Lemolo. The LCC have long argued that a pipe transferring Poulsbo and Lemolo area sewage under Liberty Bay connecting with Keyport, was a ticking time bomb. Then there was the sewage spill. "The spill has caused us to rethink some of our concerns," LCC President Richard Best explained. "One of the reasons we appealed the EIS was that we did not think your emergency spill response was adequate." While most agreed that under the circumstances, the County made the right decision, LCC members felt there were mistakes made. County Commissioner Chris Endresen agreed. "A sewer spill like this is something nobody wants to see - it's just devastating. We had to release sewage in the bay, and we should have a better plan in place to deal with those issues. I know we can do better."

Concerns had also been raised about public notification when these incidents occur, prompting recent changes in the way that KCHD now relies on several modes of getting the word out, including using the LCC's network. "If you drove from Brauer Road through Lemolo you were much more liable to know there was a \$1,000 reward being offered for a missing cat than a potentially life threatening major sewage spill," LCC board director Luis Barrantes said.

The Suquamish Tribe's operations weren't affected since they hadn't been harvesting in the bay during the recent spill. However, tribal fisheries director Rob Purser voiced concerns over the level of scrutiny City officials exercised in determining the cause and condition of the remaining pipe that could lead to another leak. "There are fish returning to Dogfish Creek in that vicinity, and for the short term not have much effect on the fisheries. I do believe there are more diagnostically capable methods available that detect weaknesses, scars, and wear that could make the pipe susceptible to corrosion. Equipment such as the "smart pig" or electrolysis methods and an x-ray type analyses would identify thin spots, in addition to something as basic as a pressure test" explained Purser. In an earlier career, Purser laid pipes throughout the state for Cascade Natural Gas. "After something like the Bellingham occurrence, there is a lot more scrutinizing over causes," he added.

Councilwoman and mayoral candidate Kathryn Quade cited the need to look at the whole picture. "This points out the need to look at alternatives in sewage treatment and conveyance systems. We should be investing in our infrastructure with an eye to the future," said Quade, citing recent technological advances and alternatives being considered in the Hood Canal, Gig Harbor, and Muckleshoot tribal lands. "In addition, reclaimed water or highly treated wastewater effluent can be reused for purposes such as irrigation or industrial processes," said Quade.



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