

Sewage spills in Huron when generators fail

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Author: TRACY DAVIS

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Treated sewage not disinfected

A 13 million-gallon sewage spill from Ann Arbor's wastewater treatment plant was all partially treated, but 4 million gallons were not disinfected. A Saturday story incorrectly stated that 4 million gallons were untreated .

Thirteen million gallons of partially treated and untreated sewage poured into the Huron River Thursday and Friday after the Ann Arbor Wastewater Treatment Plant's generators failed during the massive power outage, water authorities said. About 4 million gallons were untreated sewage .

The overflow was on the scale of spills in spring 2000, when 100-year rain events overtaxed the sewer system and caused overflows at the plant, Water Utilities Superintendent Sue McCormick said.

Meanwhile, officials said a looming water crisis in the area served by the Ypsilanti Community Utilities Authority was eased when the trickle of fresh water dribbling into some communities slowly turned to a steady stream. But water and public safety officials warned residents to continue to limit consumption and to boil water before drinking in some areas.

The sewage overflow in Ann Arbor occurred when control equipment responsible for running two diesel-powered generators, which must operate together to function, failed. The release began shortly after the massive regional power failure Thursday and continued through Friday morning, said Mike Adrounie, assistant superintendent of the treatment plant. Full power was restored at 3 p.m. Friday, and the plant was running normally.

Though no communities draw water from the Huron River south of the treatment plant, the release is a violation of the city's discharge permit and must be reported to state

environmental authorities. Such releases can result in fines, although authorities take circumstances into consideration before levying penalties.

Other communities experienced similar problems. Wayne County officials received approval from the Environmental Protection Agency for a dump from the Wyandotte sewage treatment facility into the Detroit River. Cleveland also had a sewage overflow.

In some parts of Washtenaw County, getting water to flow was the biggest concern.

Ypsilanti Community Utilities Authority Water System Supervisor Jim Bellers said water reservoirs were very low Friday evening. YCUA Director Larry Thomas said water pressure would likely not return to normal until Monday or Tuesday.

He said getting more water from Detroit was critical to maintaining service.

YCUA gets its water for thousands of Ypsilanti-area customers from Detroit, which initially lost power to its water stations. That caused low water pressure as the small amounts available trickled through the system toward Ypsilanti. But three of five stations were operating Friday night.

Firefighters in the YCUA service area were worried by very low water pressure, and the Pittsfield Township Public Safety department issued restrictions urging residents to avoid watering lawns, washing cars and even bathing in case a major fire tapped already taxed water resources.

But as the day wore on, water pressure steadily improved, firefighters said. In an emergency, firefighters said they'd be able to haul water from the river or in trucks.

"We've had run after run after run, but we've seen a gradual increase in pressure all day," said Ypsilanti Fire Department Capt. Bill Wagner.

Pittsfield Township's water restrictions ban all lawn watering and car washing, and are expected to last through Sunday. Personal water use for cooking, bathing and other purposes should be kept to a minimum, officials said. Commercial or

residential buildings with automatic sprinklers are being asked to disable them.

Ann Arbor officials also asked residents to limit nonessential use despite no problems with water distribution, and Ypsilanti also asked residents to conserve water.

The boil-water advisory in areas served by YCUA will likely be in place through the weekend, officials said. Tests must be completed to ensure the low water pressure didn't allow bacteria to enter pipes.

Though many Ypsilanti residents were happy that their water pressure was improving Friday afternoon, some were a bit cranky about having to boil their water. Briana Murphy, 22, said she hadn't been aware of the warning and had had a drink of tap water in the afternoon.

She said she'll buy water to drink rather than boil tap water.

"It almost seems like they're exaggerating a bit," she said.

News staff reporters Art Aisner and Patty Maher contributed to this report.