



MOBILE REGISTER

Residents say water was murky since July

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FISH RIVER – Residents of the Dogwood Dells neighborhood who were told last week that raw sewage was accidentally pumped into their drinking water supply say they had been reporting foul drinking water to Fairhope Public Utilities for more than four months.

Utility officials acknowledge that they did no testing of the water until recently, and say they can't be sure when sewage started coursing straight into the water supply. Dan McCrory, superintendent of the Water and Sewer department of the Fairhope utility, indicated that the contamination started when a private company, Baldwin County Sewer Service, had linked a discharge line from a travel trailer into the subdivision's water main.

But McCrory said the department keeps no log of complaints and no record of where, when or how crews respond to them. For that reason, he said he couldn't say specifically when complaints started, how the city reacted or how long raw sewage had been polluting the neighborhood's water.

Utilities in Mobile, Gulf Shores, Orange Beach, Foley and Daphne all said Friday that they maintain records of complaints and responses, and could reveal in varying levels of detail, for instance, who contacted them, when a crew was dispatched, what was observed and what was done to remedy the problem. McCrory said the Fairhope utility may now start keeping such records.

"They was complaining about this water a long time ago and the city of Fairhope, whoever's job it is to test the water, dropped the ball," said Dogwood Dells resident Lowell Powell. And he added, "We drank sewage" because of that.

Fecal coliform bacteria

Early last week, the Fairhope utility found fecal coliform bacteria while testing the drinking water in the neighborhood, McCrory said. The presence of the bacteria is considered to be a good indicator that human waste may be mixed with the water.

McCrory said he couldn't recall how high the bacterial counts were in the drinking water.

The utility discovered the misconnected sewage discharge pipe shortly after the test results came back.

On Tuesday afternoon, Baldwin County Sewer Service employees reattached the line to the correct pipe. Company owner Clarence Burke said at the scene that he wasn't sure when the error was made but would look into it. He has not since responded to Register calls.

A three-sentence news release from the company sent out Wednesday said the matter was under internal investigation and apologized to affected residents for the "inconvenience."

McCrory said Tuesday that he believed the misconnected pipe was installed on July 13. Later in the week, he said he believed the pipe wasn't connected to the camper until about two months ago.

Resident says she complained

Dogwood Dells resident Milena Damon said she began calling Fairhope to complain about the water in July. After Hurricane Katrina in late August, she said, she lobbied the utility two or three times a week. Often, she said, a crew would come out and flush the lines and tell residents that the problem was solved.

"They come and flush it and we think, 'OK, these are qualified people.' We didn't know why the water was not clear," Damon said. "We never suspected we'd been drinking and washing ourselves and brushing our teeth in human waste – that's the grossest thing anyone can even think about."

Damon echoed the comments of many other residents: "There has to be a record somewhere when they hooked this sewage to this water line."

Resident Patricia Gamble said she never complained about the water because she knew that neighbors had. She assumed the isolated neighborhood's cloudy, stinky water had something to do with the summer's hurricanes.

"They were saying they didn't find anything and we just trusted the city," Gamble said. "They started coming out in late July, early August to my best recollection and then again in the fall after the other hurricanes. They just guaranteed us it was taken care of. We didn't get any test results or ask for any."

McCrory said that the utility did flush some of the mains in the neighborhood in late summer, trying to correct sediment problems he said were related to a July lightning storm that cracked several water mains along Fish River. But he acknowledged that the utility didn't actually test the water at the time.

Said Powell's wife, Helen: "They were told that the water smelled like sewer, but they never checked it out."

As complaints heightened in recent weeks, McCrory said his crews increased their efforts in the neighborhood.

"We were out there probably at least every day for the last four weeks," he said.

McCrory said that most persistent complaints came from the owners of the camper. The errant connection had created a loop in which, once a toilet was flushed or water went down a drain, effluent would pass through a grinder pump and then be forced away from the dwelling only to be sucked right back in when a faucet was opened.

A sample was taken about three weeks ago but no bacteria turned up, McCrory said. A second sample was taken early last week and that one showed the presence of fecal coliform. McCrory said he then had his crew dig up the sewage connection on a hunch.

"It's not something you readily think about," he said. "It's so far off the wall."

Because the camper was occupied only on some weekends, the source was difficult to pinpoint and complaints were sporadic, McCrory said.

When the water was eventually shut off this week, media outlets as well as state environmental and health agencies were notified and the sewage line was quickly put in its proper place. That night, Fairhope city officials delivered bottled water to about 30 homes that would be without running water for up to three days and arranged for portable toilets and hand-washing stations to be delivered to the end of each driveway. The next day, employees from Baldwin County Sewer Service dug up other sewer connections to make sure they had been connected properly and went door-to-door offering hotel rooms to residents while the water pipes sat full of chlorine-based disinfectant.

By Friday afternoon, the Baldwin County Health Department had reviewed test results and declared that the main water line was free of contaminants. McCrory said his crews would be going to each of the affected homes to flush each one's plumbing and collect a sample that night. By today, most of the homes should have clean running water, he said.

The Alabama Department of Public Health's local offices haven't fielded any reports of illness linked to the contamination. But area director Ruth Underwood said that the agency had received a number of questions from residents concerned about what to look for.

Possible health issues

Teresa Porter, the Health Department's surveillance nurse coordinator for the area, said that possible symptoms resulting from drinking contaminated water are primarily gastrointestinal, such as vomiting, diarrhea and abdominal pain, but could also include fever.

"What we would encourage is if you're having any symptoms follow up with your physician," Porter said. The Health Department, she said, has no programs to test or screen the neighborhood's residents but would begin evaluations if several people called the agency or local doctors reported similar symptoms.

Clint Niemeyer, an Alabama Department of Environmental Management spokesman, said that ADEM would consult with the Environmental Protection Agency "to determine the most appropriate and viable enforcement actions."

"That will come about after everything is settled and the system is up and running and it has been demonstrated that the danger has passed," Niemeyer said.

The spokesman said culpability and the consequences of the situation are not clearly outlined in federal or state law.

McCrary said Baldwin County Sewer Service has not been forthcoming with details about when it began billing the camper owner for a hookup: "They're not going to give me that."

The sewer company and Fairhope have been, since May 2001, embroiled in a legal battle over the company's right to lay sewer lines on the western side of Fish River, which lies in Fairhope's planning jurisdiction and sits just across the water from the Dogwood Dells subdivision. The case was set to go to trial last Monday in Baldwin County Circuit Court, but was delayed prior to the cross-connection incident. No start date has been set yet, according to court records.

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