



MOBILE REGISTER

District attorney investigating sewer-water mix-up

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Baldwin County District Attorney David Whetstone said Thursday that his office is investigating whether laws were broken when a private firm hooked a discharge line from a travel trailer into a Fairhope-owned water supply pipe, contaminating a Fish River neighborhood's drinking water with human waste since summer.

Whetstone called the mix-up "a potentially very dangerous situation involving the public's health," and said that his staff would focus on how the mistake happened, whether the county should have any right to regulate private utilities using public rights of way, and what hindered a more rapid detection of the problem.

An Alabama Department of Environmental Management spokesman said his agency is also reviewing the incident. No serious illnesses directly linked to the contamination have been confirmed, though some area residents have reported being ill.

"We just think that's an unforgivable event," Whetstone said. "It's unfathomable to me that anybody could hook up a sewer line to a water line."

Also Thursday, Fairhope utility officials released records to the Register detailing water quality complaints they received from residents of the Dogwood Dells subdivision since July, the utility's response to each and the results of tests that followed the calls.

Those records indicate that the utility recorded and responded to seven complaints of "dirty," "stinky," "milky" water from four different households along Dogwood Dells Circle, including four from the travel trailer owner, between Aug. 22 and Nov. 28, which is the day a sample revealing the fecal coliform was collected and the day before the misconnection was discovered by a utility crew.

That Nov. 28 bacteria test was performed on samples taken from the riverside travel trailer's spigot, its water meter and a nearby fire hydrant, according to the records. The samples showed that the fecal coliform, considered a good indicator of the presence of raw sewage, was detected in each at levels of:

1 colony per 100 milliliters at the spigot.

31 colonies per 100 milliliters at the hydrant.

149 colonies per 100 milliliters at the meter.

McCrary said a single colony of fecal coliform in a sample is an unacceptable amount.

After the sewer line was disconnected, followup tests of samples taken Nov. 29 at the same sites and Nov. 30 at spots along the neighborhood's main water line showed no bacteria, according to the records.

Prior to the positive test, the records indicate only one other bacteria test on a sample collected Nov. 9 after the fourth neighborhood complaint but only the first from the travel trailer's owner, Rusty Coker. Results of

that test showed no presence of bacteria.

During the utility's previous four responses only standard tests, checking levels of pH, fluoride, chlorine and phosphate, were conducted. Those tests, along with a November test with the same criteria, showed that each level was well within drinking water standards set by state regulators.

The same examination on Nov. 28, however, indicated that no chlorine, a disinfectant, was present in the water.

"That's when we knew we had a problem," Fairhope water and sewer superintendent Dan McCrory said Thursday. "Something had overwhelmed the chlorine."

Samples for the second bacteria test were collected that day, when Kevin Hempfleng, Fairhope's chief water operator, noted that he observed water that was "cloudy with odor," according to the records. The results indicating the presence of fecal coliform were received the next day, the records say.

"As soon as we noticed the results, we immediately went over there and traced the sewer line and dug it up," McCrory said.

Other records of routine bacteria tests of the water provided to customers in the Fish River area from late July to late November indicated no fecal coliform bacteria was present.

Those samples, which were taken from five locations in the Fish River area nine separate times between July 28 and Nov. 15, are required and approved by ADEM and were analyzed at a state lab in Mobile, McCrory said and the documents show.

The city is still not certain when the contamination began, McCrory said, because the sewer company has not said exactly when the sewer line was connected to the water and the travel trailer's owner has not confirmed precisely when the travel trailer was parked on the lot and hooked up to the sewer.

McCrory has said, however, that he believes the sewer line was connected to the water pipe July 13 by Baldwin County Sewer Service and linked to the travel trailer in late August, when complaints of foul water began.

Baldwin County Sewer Service owner Clarence Burke has not replied to several requests for comment since last week when he spoke with a reporter at the scene as one of his crews repaired the misconnection.

As of Thursday morning, McCrory said that 27 of 29 affected dwellings have regained running water that has been certified as clean by the Baldwin County Health Department and ADEM. The remaining homes have not because their owners haven't been around to allow utility workers to flush their plumbing and test the water, he said.

Fairhope City Council President Bob Gentle said Thursday that he would push for the city to recoup from the sewer company the costs of disinfecting and testing the Dogwood Dells water supply; providing about 30 portable toilets, handwashing stations and bottled water to affected residents; and utility employee overtime.

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