

Contaminated water closes portions of local beach

By Dani Palmer
Cannon Beach Gazette

The city of Cannon Beach closed off a portion of its beach last week after a pump station quit and spilled 11,000 gallons of untreated sewage onto the sand in front of the Wayfarer Restaurant and Lounge.

On the morning of July 20, around 5:30 a.m., the internal power supply to the Gower Street pump station's computer stopped working and alarms routed through the unit never went off, Public Works Director Dan Grassick said.

It was when one of the city's Public Works' employees walked along the beach around 7:30 a.m. that the spill was noticed.

An emergency overflow pipe, permitted by design by the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality, sent the sewage onto the beach instead of the middle of town.

"We immediately responded," Grassick said. "We removed about three inches of sand in the area. It (the sewage) didn't go all the way out to the surf."

The pump was manually restarted and Grassick noted that seven workers, including himself, were finished with cleanup by 1 p.m. that Monday. McEwan Construction assisted with heavy equipment.

It's that "busy time of year," so a couple of Public Works' employees were on vacation, he added.

The area was cornered off, signs were put up and DEQ along with the Oregon Emergency Response System were notified about the incident.

No closure needed?

Ecola Creek Watershed Council Chair Mike Manzu-

lli said warning signs should have been more clear about what exactly happened. They read, "Warning. Contaminated drainage. No water play."

"The day of the spill, I witnessed dogs drinking the Gower Street water and numerous children playing in and around the spill area," Manzulli said. "When I visited the site the day after the spill with City Manager (Brant) Kucera, we found signage 100 yards apart so that there was no way to know the site may still be contaminated when walking north on the beach."

Grassick noted that they did put out more signs after speaking with Manzulli.

The watershed chair said the city should have "closed the beach until the outfall water tested safe" and informed the public about the spill.

There weren't any notices posted on the city's website or elsewhere, Grassick said, because the beach didn't need to be closed.

The area was "adequately signed," he said, and the contaminated water was only about an inch deep and didn't make it out to the ocean. It went about 200 yards before ending in the sand.

A tale of two tests

The city tested samples from the affected portion of the beach daily, and by Wednesday, numbers were below state health advisory levels, Grassick said.

To err on the side of caution, staff waited until Friday to take signs down, when the sand had 144 organisms per 100 milliliters of water.

Going by freshwater standards, running an E. coli test, the state threshold is 406 organisms.

When the city tested the water on Monday, right after the spill and before cleanup, E. coli results were "maxed out" at 2,400 organisms.

Those numbers began to drop rapidly the next day, after cleanup was complete, Grassick added.

The Surfrider Foundation ran enterococcus tests, finding 3,130 organisms per 100 milliliters on the beach, 132 in the outfall and 10 in the ocean on Tuesday.

That health advisory level is 158 organisms per 100 milliliters.

Grassick said the enterococcus and E. coli tests are different with separate thresholds. The enterococcus test is the standard for marine water and the E. coli test for freshwater.

Thomas Lossen with the Oregon Beach Monitoring Program said a public advisory would have been issued discouraging water contact had the contaminated water met the ocean.

With the enterococcus test, Grassick said the level was below the threshold in the outfall, but "sky high" on the beach.

Factors such as the water sitting under the hot sun with seagulls depositing fecal matter into it may have made the enterococcus bacteria multiple, hiking its test results, he said.

The challenge, Grassick noted, is differentiating the growth from a true contamination issue that's a health concern or a natural process. "Therein lies the dilemma we have," he said.

Not generally harmful themselves, the presence of enterococci and E. coli may indicate pathogenic bacteria that can cause short-term

health effects, such as diarrhea, cramps and nausea if ingested, according to the US Environmental Protection Agency.

It could've been worse

"It's serious anytime you spill sewage," Grassick said, but he added that it was a minor amount "relatively speaking."

If the incident had gone unnoticed for several hours more, there could've been tens of thousands of gallons spilled, he added. In 2008, DEQ fined Cannon Beach \$1,365 for the discharge of 85,000 gallons of untreated sewage onto the beach. That spill resulted in a temporary beach closure and was caused by failure of an air compressor at a facility pump station.

A portion of it eventually reached the Pacific Ocean with the tide.

"11,000 gallons of raw sewage may be a minor amount to Dan Grassick, but for those of us that cherish our health and coastal natural resources, raw sewage in our streams and on our beaches is a very big deal," Manzulli said.

Randy Bailey, an inspector for the Cannon Beach Sewage Treatment Plant with DEQ's Water Quality Division, said DEQ has requested a follow-up report on the cause and will determine whether any enforcement action needs to be taken.

Grassick said no one on staff was around when this particular pump station's warning system was designed, so it'll be changed to an alarm independent of the station's computer unit to prevent similar incidents in the future.

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Public Works Director Dan Grassick

CANNON BEACH POLICE LOG

July 12

12:17 a.m. 1400 block of South Hemlock Street: assault. David V. Thorne, 67, of Sidney, British Columbia, was arrested for assault IV, intentionally or recklessly causing physical injury to another, and transported to the Clatsop County Jail.

July 14

6:15 a.m. Fifth and Fir Streets: suspicious circumstances. After further investigation, a subject was found operating a vehicle without an ID, insurance or registration. Due to the vehicle not being mobile during contact, a warning was given to fix all issues before traveling down the roadway.

July 15

12:41 a.m. Highway 101 and Warren Way: driving under the influence. Sheila R. Leftwich, 22, of Portland, provided a BAC of 0.10 and was preliminarily charged with DUI and an unlawful or un-signaled turn.

July 16

9:33 p.m. 100 block of North Hemlock Street: animal complaint. Police received report of a dog bite. The victim was taken to Providence Seaside Hospital by family and the dog was released to the owner. A bite form was faxed to the county.

July 17

1:48 p.m. Hemlock Street and Coolidge Avenue: suspicious circumstances. Police received report of a stranger pulling up beside a pedestrian, following her slowly, rolling down his window and stating, "I wouldn't run from me if I were you." An officer placed a note on the window of the unoccupied suspect truck, requesting he make contact with the police to advise his intent in contact with the female.

2:25 p.m. Pig 'N Pancake: hit and run. A hit and run was reported.

10:18 p.m. 100 block of North Hemlock Street: civil. A male had

refused to pay the amount for cab fare. He and the cab driver came to a civil compromise.

July 18

2:33 p.m. 400 block of Fir Street: theft of services.

6:11 p.m. Warren Way and Hemlock Street: A subject was cited for driving uninsured and no operators license. The vehicle was impounded.

10:31 p.m. 600 block of Beech Street: driving under the influence. Gary A. Herman, 48, of Cannon Beach, was arrested

for DUI and driving uninsured. He refused to take a breathalyzer and was later released.

July 19

1:00 p.m. Spruce and Adams Streets: accident. An officer responded to a motor vehicle crash.

1:54 p.m. First and Hemlock Streets: assistance rendered. A subject felt someone may have tampered with the bike lock securing his family's bicycles to a rack. The code wasn't working and the lock appeared bent.



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