What to Expect With a Sewage Spill

Moving wastewater from the home/business where it was produced to the plant for treatment is a fairly elaborate, expensive process. On average wastewater is 0.01 solid per gallon, and if the water isn't flowing fast enough, solids will settle in the pipe. Wastewater infrastructure is built so that water flows at a rate of 2 ft/second by gravity until it reaches a wet well. Wet wells are large, deep pits that hold waste until pumped to a higher elevation closer to the plant. All over Cherokee County, wastewater is moved in this manner of gravity flow down and then pumped up until it reaches one of our 3 plants. Like a well-oiled machine, this process works all day every day moving our wastewater...that is until it doesn't. From time to time, things break or clog resulting in a sewage spill. Sometimes this can be attributed to a mechanical failure and sometimes because something went into our line that wasn't supposed to. Fats, oils, grease, flushable wipes, and other items that don't belong are often the culprits of sewer spills.

So, what happens when wastewater does spill?

To begin, wastewater that escapes from the infrastructure and doesn't reach a body of surface water is referred to as an overflow. Overflows are not great, but the amount of impact it has on the environment is minimal since it can infiltrate into the ground. By contrast, wastewater that reaches surface water is defined as a "spill". Spills can be "minor" or "major" depending on how much got in the water and the impact it made on it. Minor spills are less than 10,000 gallons and they have minimal impact on the pH and Dissolved Oxygen (D.O.) levels. Major spills on the other hand can be classified by volumes > 10,000 gallons and any of the following characteristics: a drop in pH <5, a drop in D.O. >2 mg/L, and/or observable impacts ≥ a mile downstream. This determination is made by taking samples and measurements both up and downstream from the location wastewater entered into a stream.

The monitoring requirements for major spills are to monitor the pH, D.O., conductivity, temperature, and bacteria up and downstream every day for the first 7 days. Then once a week for the next 3 weeks. This creates an initial geometric mean (average) for the spill comprised of these 10 sampling events. Large signs near the body of water describing what happened will also be posted to notify the public as well as a notice to the local newspaper and televised news organization. Next a geometric mean (1 sampling event a week/4 weeks) is required at the 3 and 12-month anniversary of the incident.

So, why do you need to know about spills?

Your drinking water is not affected by the status of a sewage spill. Our drinking water comes from the Etowah near Ball Ground, Ga, and is specifically treated to kill harmful bacteria.

The CCWSA relies on the public to be the eyes and ears in our service area, to let us know if they see a manhole overflowing, or if there is a persistent smell of rotten eggs, or if a body of water looks "off". The faster we know a problem exists, the faster we can respond and fix problems when they do arise. We can be reached at 770 479-1813.

If you live near an area that has had a sewage spill, you will see CCWSA employees out to fix, locate, and track the spill. Later you will see staff out collecting samples, which may require access to private property to get the required samples.

Please remember to only flush the 3 Ps: Pee, Poop, and (Toilet)Paper. Trash your fats, oils, and grease instead of washing them down the drain with hot water. Although these substances are liquid when hot, they solidify when they cool down and unfortunately that occurs in our sewer lines.

If you are interested in learning more contact Lori Forrester (Public Information Specialist) @lori.forrester@ccwsa.com.