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Wissahickon Creek Hit Again: DRN Calls for Accountability

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DRN Calls for Environmental Accountability

The Ambler Sewage Treatment Plant released 55,000 gallons of raw and/or partially treated sewage into the Wissahickon Creek when the sewage plant malfunctioned and the backup generator failed yesterday, June 20, around 8:00 pm. The effluent entered the creek in 3 separate but related incidents through a manhole and from 2 tanks. Reportedly the plant switched to ultraviolet light disinfection and a new generator was brought in. The plant is reporting that they are operating normally today.

Pollution levels in the creek were being tested; dangerous bacteria in the creek can harm human and fish life. The PA Fish and Boat Commission is not reporting a fish kill.

This latest spill follows a June 14 pollution event when a cyanochloride compound was released from the Upper Gwynedd Township sewage treatment plant to the Wissahickon Creek, causing a major fish kill of at least 1000 fish and a high level of toxicity in the water. DEP banned fishing, swimming, or any contact recreation on the Wissahickon Creek and the Schuylkill River. The Schuylkill River ban was lifted June 16, just in time for weekend boating events. The Wissahickon Creek advisory remains in force.

Delaware Riverkeeper Maya van Rossum called on the City to take extra precautions to safeguard public health by broadcasting widely the warning not to go into the water, especially since the Wissahickon is a popular swimming location for area children and pets on these hot summer days. She warned that the Creek and river are also heavily fished and used by boaters, so it is also important for agencies to make sure anglers are notified of the fish consumption advisory. Ms. Rossum called on the culprit who caused the chemical release to step forward when the event occurred so investigators could accurately assess the impacts and dangers of the pollution event. A week later, no definitive report has been made, a cause for serious concern.

Reports are focusing on the major dischargers that send wastewater to the Upper Gwynedd plant on the Wissahickon Creek. The largest are Visteon, Merck Pharmaceuticals, and Colorcon. Arsenic as well as cyanide and other chemicals were being investigated. Agency officials seem to be ready to announce findings of their investigations shortly.

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The Ambler Sewage Plant is no stranger to problems. It was reported by EPA that the plant violated fecal coliform or suspended solids permit limits between 2003 and 2005 in 5 of the 12 reporting periods.

“The Wissahickon is a heavily utilized creek. There are so many dischargers that in summer months the Creek is mostly effluent”, says May van Rossum, the Delaware Riverkeeper. “This directly conflicts with what people downstream use the Creek most for –swimming, boating and fishing. The Creek needs to be cleaned up and better protected from routine and extraordinary pollution events”, says van Rossum.

“The Wissahickon Creek’s major dischargers are Ambler Borough, Upper Gwynedd Township, Abington Township, Upper Dublin Township, and North Wales Borough. These plants receive wastewater from many sources, including some of the largest manufacturers in the region. There needs to be more accountability from these big companies” said Tracy Carluccio, Special Projects Director for Delaware Riverkeeper Network. “The creek and river are not a dumping ground. Fish and aquatic life, people who drink the water from the 2 major water treatment plants downstream, swimmers and anglers all rely on good water quality in these waterways and in light of this double hit in one week, it certainly looks like they are not getting it”, said Carluccio.