

Department of Ecology News Release

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE - Oct. 18, 1999

99-213

Contact: Jani Gilbert, Public Information Manager, 509-456-4464; pager, 509-622-1289

City of Spokane fined for discharging raw sewage into river

SPOKANE-In August, an alert canoeist was the first to spot raw sewage flowing into the Spokane River from the city of Spokane's sewer system. His tip to a local television station has led to a \$15,000 fine issued this week by the Washington state Department of Ecology (Ecology).

The raw sewage came from a pipe on the north shore of the river near the mouth of Latah Creek and was estimated to be discharging between 50 and 200 gallons per minute for up to three days.

Normally the pipe handles overflow from the sewer line during large storm events and was designed to protect the rest of the sewage system from back-ups.

The overflow was reported to the city the morning of Aug. 23, but the city did not find it until Ecology staff and KXLY-TV of Spokane showed it to them shortly after 1 p.m. on Aug. 24. KXLY-TV received the first call from the canoeing citizen and then alerted Ecology.

Once the proper pipe was found, Spokane sewer maintenance staff quickly discovered and removed a blockage between the sanitary sewer line and the "combined sewer overflow" line, which caused the unlawful discharge.

The city is being penalized for three days of sewage discharge and for two days of improper operations and maintenance. The amount of the penalty also reflects the delay in finding the pipe and stopping the discharge.

"Fortunately, no human health or environmental harm were reported," said Carl Nuechterlein, Ecology's water-quality manager for Eastern Washington. "But the discharge occurred during a summer weekend when the river was being heavily used."

Also, during summer months the Spokane River's flow is historically very low, thereby decreasing the dilution and increasing the potential for human and environmental harm.

Ecology issued a notice of violation (NOV) to the city on Sept. 2. The city responded that it would increase the frequency of inspections of the combined-sewer overflow line for two months and clean as needed.

Since June 1995, Ecology has received 13 complaints about sewer overflows in Spokane.

Ecology has recommended that the city install signs where combined sewer-overflow pipes are located so citizens have the exact location and know who to call if they discover a sewage discharge.

"Signs near the pipes could significantly reduce the time it takes to respond and stop the discharge," Nuechterlein said.

Ecology plans to require the signs and other actions designed to reduce discharges from the combined sewer overflow pipes when the city's treatment plant permit is renewed later this year. The city is currently working with Ecology to implement a long-term plan to significantly reduce or eliminate discharges of untreated sewage to the Spokane River.

Meanwhile, when citizens see an overflow from a pipe they are urged to call Spokane's sewer maintenance office's 24 hour phone number, 625-7900.

The penalty may be appealed to the state's Pollution Control Hearings Board within 30 days or the city may file an application for relief with Ecology within 15 days.