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Metro

City Editor: Mark Ellis / 614-461-5097 • State: Ann Fisher / 614-461-5569
State Government and Politics: Darrel Rowland / 614-461-5132

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Sludge found in Olentangy River

City estimates pipe leaked for a month

By Michael Hawthorne
Dispatch Environment Reporter

At least 300 tons of lime sludge from a Columbus water-treatment plant have spilled into a ditch that leads to the Olentangy River, just upstream from a stretch where biologists found a rare fish last summer.

City officials are spending at least $300,000 to clean up the mess. They said they didn't realize a pipe carrying the sludge had rusted through until last week, when bicyclists riding along the river noticed a light-colored substance suspended below the water's surface.

The gooey sludge is a minor skin irritant for humans, but it can choke off life at the bottom of the river, making it difficult for bottom-feeding fish to find food.

"We're finding the sludge all over the area," said Lynn Kelly, the city's water supply and treatment coordinator. "As soon as the river gets to the point where we can see the bottom, we should be able to find out just how much we're talking about."

An environmental cleanup team hired by the city was back at work yesterday skimming the sludge from a ditch near the Bethel Road-Rt. 315 interchange. About 300 tons have been removed since Friday, Kelly said. Officials estimated it had been leaking into the ditch for about a month.

The sludge normally is pumped through a 12-inch pipe from the Warren J. "Hap" Cremean treatment plant on Morse Road to an abandoned quarry off McKinley Avenue. If not for the bicyclists, it's unclear whether the city would have discovered the 2-inch hole in the rusty pipe near the Bethel Road interchange.

"One of our members saw this in the water and thought it was sediment from the 315 construction," said Erin Miller, coordinator for Friends of the Lower Olentangy Watershed, an environmental group.

"He had the presence of mind to trace it upstream to the leak."

Tracy Zimmerman, spokeswoman for the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency, said a decision hasn't been made about whether the city will be fined for the discharge.

The EPA is in the final stages of an extensive evaluation of the Olentangy. Last summer, agency biologists discovered four bluebreast darters, a rare fish that is an important water-quality indicator because it can't tolerate pollution.

It was unknown yesterday whether the fish were in danger from the sludge.

Discovery of the fish is expected to play a role in an ongoing debate about building a bridge over the Olentangy that would link Bethel and Morse roads.

This is the second time in recent months that lime sludge has been an issue in Columbus. The Ohio Department of Transportation is removing nearly 100,000 cubic yards of the semihardened

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The city of Columbus is spending at least $300,000 to clean up lime sludge that leaked from a rusty pipe into a ditch near the Olentangy River.
Dispatch graphic

SLUDGE *from* E1

sludge from the bank and bottom of the Scioto River at the Spring-Sandusky interchange under construction northwest of Downtown.

Construction workers must remove the sludge before continuing work on that portion of the highway. The sludge was found about 750 yards downstream from the city's Dublin Road water-treatment plant, where sludge commonly was dumped into the river until the mid-1960s.

Environmentalists are concerned about the accidental spill on the Olentangy because that area is considered an exceptional stretch of that river.

"It's really a shame," Miller said. "But I'm so glad we've got people watching the river and cleaning it up."