



At a Glance

Why We Did This Review

We evaluated the effectiveness of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA's) programs in preventing and addressing contamination of surface water from hazardous chemicals passing through publicly owned treatment works (hereafter "sewage treatment plants"). Hazardous wastes, regulated by the EPA, may be harmful to human health or the environment. Sewage treatment plants receive permits, from the EPA or states, for discharges to surface waters that establish pollutant monitoring requirements. However, hazardous chemicals discharged to sewers are not regulated under EPA hazardous waste regulations. Rather, they are regulated under the Clean Water Act, which focuses on a list of 126 priority pollutants that does not include many hazardous chemicals.

This report addresses the following EPA goals or cross-agency strategies:

- *Protecting America's waters.*
- *Ensuring the safety of chemicals and preventing pollution.*
- *Protecting human health and the environment by enforcing laws and assuring compliance.*

Send all inquiries to our public affairs office at (202) 566-2391 or visit www.epa.gov/oig.

The full report is at: www.epa.gov/oig/reports/2014/20140929-14-P-0363.pdf

More Action Is Needed to Protect Water Resources From Unmonitored Hazardous Chemicals

What We Found

Management controls put in place by the EPA to regulate and control hazardous chemical discharges from sewage treatment plants to water resources have limited effectiveness. The EPA regulates hazardous chemical discharges to and from sewage treatment plants, but these regulations are not effective in controlling the discharge of hundreds of hazardous chemicals to surface waters such as lakes and streams. Sewage treatment plant staff do not monitor for hazardous chemicals discharged by industrial users. This is due to a general regulatory focus on the priority pollutants list that has not been updated since 1981, limited monitoring requirements, limited coordination between EPA offices, a lack of tracking hazardous waste notifications required for submittal by industrial users, or a lack of knowledge of discharges reported by industrial users under the Toxics Release Inventory. Except for EPA Region 9, sewage treatment plant permits generally include very few monitoring requirements or effluent limits, which can limit enforcement actions.

EPA does not have mechanisms to address discharge of hazardous chemicals into water resources.

The EPA developed whole effluent toxicity test results as a mechanism to identify toxic chemicals such as hazardous discharges to sewage treatment plants. However, these are not required for all permits, and are not tracked by the EPA to verify that sewage treatment plants are reporting results as required. Moreover, exceedances of chemical limits in permits and toxicity tests do not trigger notification to enforcement programs. Consequently, the EPA may not be aware of chemical discharge or toxicity exceedances that should be addressed to minimize potentially harmful contamination of water resources.

Recommendations and Planned Agency Corrective Actions

We recommend that the EPA develop a format for sharing annual Toxics Release Inventory data, develop a list of chemicals beyond the priority pollutants list for inclusion in permits, confirm compliance with the hazardous waste notification requirement, and track required submittals of toxicity tests and violations. The agency suggested a change to one recommendation, which the OIG accepted. All recommendations are resolved.

Noteworthy Achievements

The EPA has designed the Discharge Monitoring Report Pollutant Loading Tool to provide access to surface water discharge and other data.