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Deal aims to stop sewage spills on Waikiki beaches

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To prevent another sewage spill from contaminating Waikiki's famous beaches, the Honolulu government announced Monday it must upgrade sewer lines under a settlement with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

The deal ends years of lawsuits and sanitation warnings caused by an aging sewage system that suffered from decades of neglect.

The threat spilled over in 2006, when 48 million gallons of sewage was flushed into a Waikiki canal and reached beaches after weeks of heavy rain. If the wastewater hadn't been released into the ocean, sewage could have backed up into hotels, homes and businesses.

"My biggest nightmare was to have a sewage spill in Waikiki ... and that's what happened," said Mayor Mufi Hannemann. "This is a clear case of pay now or pay later."

Details of the settlement weren't disclosed, but they require the city to improve wastewater collection and sewage treatment.

"No one in Hawaii should be at risk of swimming in raw sewage," said Donna Wong, executive director for Hawaii's Thousand Friends, one of the groups that filed the lawsuits.

The upgrades likely mean more increases to sewer charges paid by island residents and businesses, which will pass their costs on to tourists.

"Everyone from residents to tourists care about clean water, especially when they come to a pristine place like Hawaii," said Jared Blumenfeld, regional administrator for the EPA. "This is the right decision, the right time, and we're very proud to be part of this settlement."

The agreement calls for improved wastewater collection pipes called force mains, as well as upgrades to pump stations.

The deal also sets an extended timeline for the city's two largest wastewater treatment plants, at Sand Island and Honouliuli, to begin handling secondary treatment of sewage that contains pesticides, toxins and pathogens found in water tests, Blumenfeld said.

Honolulu is the largest city in the country that hasn't required its wastewater treatment plants to handle secondary treatment, said Hannemann, who maintains that the city's water is safe even without it.

"I'm confident that once we upgrade the system and we take care of our structural deficits that we're no longer going to be seeing these type of problems," said city Environmental Services Director Timothy Steinberger, referring to spills like those in Waikiki.

The proposed settlement resolves four lawsuits, filed between 1994 and 2010 by environmental groups including the Sierra Club, Our Children's Earth Foundation and Hawaii's Thousand Friends.

It still needs to be approved by the city council and the federal court.

"This is a significant long sought-after win for the environment," said Robert Harris, director for the Sierra Club's Hawaii chapter. "Under the settlement, the city will improve our wastewater system in a systematic long-term fashion to protect the health of citizens and our coastal environment."

Although the cost of the sewage system upgrades wasn't revealed, Hannemann said last year it would cost the city about \$1.2 billion to add secondary treatment capabilities to its two major wastewater plants, forcing the city to raise sewer fees.

Average monthly sewer service charges have already gone up from \$33 in 2005 to nearly \$79 this year. Those increases have helped pay for increased sewer line inspections, more sewer repairs and a drop in gravity main spills.

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