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OUR OPINION

Writing on the wall for city's sewage treatment plants

THE ISSUE

The EPA's rejection of a Clean Water Act exemption for the city's largest sewage treatment complex follows a similar decision on its Honouliuli facility.

The federal government's preliminary decision to deny an exemption that allows continued release of lesser-treated sewage into the ocean came as no surprise to city officials.

Even so, refusal of a variance for the Sand Island treatment plant, Honolulu's largest, combined with a similar ruling in March against its second-largest facility at Honouliuli, adds pressure to the city already trying to cope with the enormous cost of repairing sewer lines across the island.

Under the circumstances, the reflexive inclination is to challenge the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's action. However, officials might do better by exploring the city's options in reaching compliance, working with the EPA to come up with a reasonable plan and seeking help from Hawaii's congressional delegation for possible federal funds.

The EPA's motivation isn't to punish the city, but says primary treatment of waste water does not meet Clean Water Act standards "to protect marine life or human consumption of fish." Upgrading to secondary treatment, through which most of the waste's organic matter is removed through bacteria or biological techniques, would cleanse discharges.

The agency says secondary treatment is required at nearly all other sewage plants across the nation, but city officials argue that those plants send waste water into rivers and lakes while Hawaii's outfall flows into the ocean about 1.7 miles from shore. But the EPA notes that many coastal cities that once sought variances, "especially in areas where there is heavy recreational beach use," have upgraded their plants.

City officials have estimated that improving the Honouliuli and Sand Island plants will cost more than \$1.2 billion. With repairs of a deteriorating web of sewer lines priced in the hundreds of millions of dollars and sewer fees already projected to double over the next few years, it's no wonder political leaders -- and ratepayers -- are distressed.

Nonetheless, the current predicament results from long-deferred

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maintenance and unrealistically low fees with little thought of the consequences. Continuing to deny the need for upgrades and expansion of the sewer system while allowing commercial and residential population growth would be irresponsible.

The EPA won't make its decision on the Sand Island plant final until after the public weighs in; its determination on Honouliuli is expected next year. City officials say it will oppose the variance rejection, but should not count on prevailing.

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### HONOLULU STAR-BULLETIN

**Dennis Francis**, Publisher     **Lucy Young-Oda**, Assistant Editor  
(808) 529-4762  
lyoungoda@starbulletin.com

**Frank Bridgewater**, Editor     **Michael Rovner**, Assistant Editor  
(808) 529-4791     (808) 529-4768  
fbridgewater@starbulletin.com     mrovner@starbulletin.com

**Mary Poole**, Editorial Page Editor  
(808) 529-4748; mpoole@starbulletin.com

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