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Groups go to court to get sewage fixes

Remedies sought to prevent a repeat

By Diana Leone
dleone@starbulletin.com

» [Changes are in motion a year after the spill](#)

A year after Honolulu's largest sewage spill, three environmental groups announced yesterday that they are going back to court to force the city to better clean up after itself.

Between March 24 and 30 last year, the city diverted 48 million gallons of raw sewage into the Ala Wai Canal after the aging Beach Walk sewer line broke. The spill ultimately closed Waikiki beaches for up to a week and made headlines around the world.

"We all remember what happened a year ago at this very site," Hawaii Sierra Club Director Jeff Mikulina said yesterday on the banks of the Ala Wai Canal.

At a judge's request, the Sierra Club, Hawaii's Thousand Friends and the mainland-based Our Children's Earth have been in settlement talks between the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the city regarding improvements to its sewage system.

Mikulina said the groups will ask a federal judge on April 17 to require the city to:

- » Do a risk assessment of the sewage system.
- » Rank sewage problems by their likelihood of causing large spills.
- » Fix problems starting with the biggest risks first.
- » Create a comprehensive emergency plan for sewer breaks.

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CRAIG T. KOJIMA / CKOJIMA@STARBULLETIN.COM
 Environmental groups want a federal judge to force the city to comply with federal clean water standards. Attending a press conference yesterday at the Ala Wai Canal were Fred Madlener and Donna Wong of Hawaii's Thousand Friends and Jeff Mikulina of the Sierra Club. [CLICK FOR LARGE](#)

Remedies sought to prevent a repeat

Honolulu's Sewers: 1 year after disaster

By Diana Leone
dleone@starbulletin.com

Thousands of people were surfing, swimming and sunning in Waikiki yesterday -- a stark difference from the near-deserted sands there a year ago, in the wake of Honolulu's largest sewage spill.

Bacteria levels closed Waikiki beaches for up to a week after the March 24-30 spill of 48 million gallons of raw sewage into the Ala Wai Canal.

The smell of the Beach Walk spill is gone, but changes brought by the incident continue to unfold:

» Three environmental groups said yesterday that a year is long enough to pursue solutions for Honolulu's aging sewer system. The Sierra Club, Hawaii's Thousand Friends and Our Children's Earth say they will ask a federal judge to make the city comply with the Clean Water Act, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency rules and its 1995 consent decree outlining required sewer system improvements.

"I'm sympathetic with people paying fees for sewers," said Fred Madlener, a Hawaii's Thousand Friends board member. "But you can't have a civilized life without sewers. Even the Romans had sewers -- and it cost them, too."

The environmental groups do not seek fines or penalties, Madlener said. "What we're after is to participate in plans to a remedy."

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» Mayor Mufi Hannemann insists that fixing Honolulu's aging sewer system is one of his top priorities. In his State of the City address last month, he noted that his administration raised sewer fees for the first time in 12 years in 2006 and put all the money into sewer projects. His proposed spending of \$944 million on sewer projects in three years almost equals sewer spending for the decade before he took office, he said.

City spokesman Bill Brennan said yesterday that despite the environmental groups' complaints, a settlement with the EPA is coming soon, though he could not say how soon.

"My main priority is dealing with the EPA," Hannemann said yesterday.

» The EPA still has not fined the city for the Beach Walk spill or for many of the other sewage spills that happened since the 1995 consent decree governing its mandated upgrade of its aging sewer system.

"We want to ensure the city is taking all necessary steps to repair their sewer systems and to make sure there's not a repeat of the Beach Walk disaster last year," said John Kemmerer, EPA's associate water division director for the Pacific Southwest.

Kemmerer complimented Hannemann's administration for "really positive and useful" proposals but said his agency wants "to see them carried through."

» The state Department of Health has improved its surveillance and warning systems for water quality testing since the Beach Walk spill, said Larry Lau, deputy director for environmental health.

People can check a telephone hot line or the Health Department's Web site for closed beach warnings, and the Web site posts of a running record of water quality sampling. Sampling at the state's most used beaches has been increased to three times a week, up from two.

The department is also working hard to find quicker, more effective ways to test water quality, Lau said. Current testing requires a 24-hour lab procedure to get results.

» The city has formed a sewage station and force-main task force, where staffers meet every two weeks "to address the condition of priority stations and to make them more efficient and less prone to failure," city spokesman Brennan said.

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