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EPA ruling could cost city \$1B

The federal agency upholds its decision to require wastewater plant upgrades

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A decision by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to force the city to upgrade its two largest wastewater treatment plants would require a "significant" increase in sewer fees, Mayor Mufi Hannemann said yesterday.

The EPA upheld an earlier decision to reject waivers it granted to the city for years, allowing Sand Island and Honouliuli Wastewater Treatment plants to operate without a higher level of processing called secondary treatment.

The decision doesn't come as a surprise to city officials but is a disappointment after they fought the additional treatment aimed at organic matter.

The city estimates that it will cost \$1.2 billion for the upgrades, which would require a considerable hike in sewer fees. EPA officials say they want to work with the city to develop a "realistic" schedule for the upgrades without being too burdensome during the sour economy.

The EPA decision states that the city is violating federal water-quality laws without secondary treatment.

Hannemann contends that secondary treatment is unnecessary and not beneficial.

— *Laurie Au*

[FULL STORY >>](#)

By *Laurie Au*

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The city plans to appeal a decision yesterday by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency that forces the city to upgrade its two major wastewater treatment plants at an estimated cost of \$1.2 billion, which would require considerable increases in residential sewer fees.

Mayor Mufi Hannemann said he is disappointed but not surprised at the EPA's decision that rejects the city's request to continue operating Sand Island and Honouliuli Wastewater Treatment plants without an additional level of filtering called "secondary treatment."

"Every indication was that the EPA would decline to renew the waivers these plants have operated under for so long, so (yesterday's) decision was not unexpected," Hannemann said in a statement yesterday. "We will review the final decision and in all likelihood seek a review, as provided for by the EPA regulations."

Hannemann said he stands by his earlier assertion that the upgrades are unnecessary and not beneficial to the environment.

The mayor had fought aggressively against secondary treatment, pleading with the EPA to allow the city to focus on repairing the aging sewage system rather than also paying for upgrades on its wastewater plants.

Wayne Nasti, the EPA regional administrator for the Pacific Southwest, upheld his earlier decision, saying the city was violating the federal Clean Water Act without secondary treatment.

"This action will ensure that residents and visitors using Hawaii's ocean waters are protected from inadequately treated sewage," Nasti said in a news release. "We will work with the city on a realistic schedule to upgrade its two largest wastewater plants, taking into account the other priorities for improvements to Honolulu's wastewater system."

Secondary treatment removes organic matter by exposing the waste water to

ENSURING WATER quality

Action: The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency says the city must upgrade processing at two sewage treatment plants.

Where: Sand Island and Honouliuli Wastewater Treatment plants.

Cost: An estimated \$1.2 billion.

Current process: Primary treatment filters out large objects and grit.

Upgraded process: Secondary treatment removes organic matter by exposing the waste water to bacteria.



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VIDEO EPA Ruling To Cost City Millions

bacteria. Currently, the city operates these two plants at "primary treatment," which filters out large objects and grit, such as rags and small stones. These two plants are the last of the 26 publicly owned plants in the state to operate without secondary treatment.



The Environmental Protection Agency ruled today the city must upgrad it two largest sewage plants. [Watch]

According to city estimates, upgrading to secondary treatment would cost \$800 million for Sand Island and \$400 million for Honouliuli. Other local politicians also lobbied against the upgrades, including U.S. Sen. Daniel Inouye, who said it would "bankrupt" the city.

In an interview last year, Nastri said the EPA had required other cities to install similar upgrades without depleting their budgets. However, when the EPA makes decisions on environmental permits, cost considerations aren't the main factors. The bottom line, Nastri said, was that the city was violating water-quality laws.



"The main issue is compliance," Nastri said in March 2008. "If you're not in compliance, the Clean Water Act says you need to move to secondary treatment. They've already failed to meet the permit requirements."

The city has until Feb. 9 to appeal the decision to the EPA's Environmental Appeals Board.

Robert Harris, the director of the Hawaii chapter of the Sierra Club, praised the EPA's decision, but said he was disappointed the city plans on continuing its fight against secondary treatment.

"It's a little disappointing," Harris said. "This issue has been going on for 20-plus years and we're all familiar with the number of lawsuits the city has been involved in. Honolulu is one of the few cities that isn't doing secondary treatment. This may not be acting in the best interests of the citizens."

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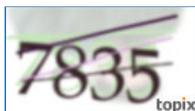
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