

Ensure public awareness of sewage discharges

Wastewater operators must notify residents and downstream communities when untreated or partially treated wastewater is released.

Challenge

Aging infrastructure leads to hundreds of releases of untreated or partially treated wastewater to Minnesota lakes, streams, public spaces, and private properties each year. More frequent and severe rainstorms are making the situation worse.

When heavy rains infiltrate cracked sewer lines, wastewater treatment systems can easily become overwhelmed with a high volume of water. Facilities then face a difficult decision: release wastewater that is not fully treated or risk the backup of sewage into homes. Such releases can also occur when sewer mains and pumps malfunction, releasing untreated or partially treated wastewater to community streets and public areas.



Current statute requires wastewater system owners to report releases to the Minnesota State Duty Officer but does not require notification to downstream drinking water sources or the public. While the MPCA can currently recommend that municipalities provide public notification of unauthorized wastewater releases, it cannot require them to do so.

Proposal

This proposal requires wastewater plant operators to notify the public and downstream communities and drinking water facilities if an unauthorized wastewater discharge occurs. It also requires posting of signs at any public-use areas, such as parks or public right-of-way areas, that are directly impacted by a release of untreated or partially treated wastewater. The MPCA developed this policy language with wastewater operators and other stakeholders. This proposal also directs the MPCA to provide guidance that wastewater operators can use to comply with this provision.

Why it's important

Downstream residents and communities need to be aware of releases of untreated or partially treated sewage for several reasons:

- Bacteria and other harmful substances in the water can pose acute or long-term human health risks.
- People can make informed decisions about the timing of activities such as fishing, swimming, and boating if they know of such releases.

- At least 13 communities serving millions of Minnesotans, including Minneapolis and St. Paul, draw their drinking water from surface waters.

For more information

Tom Johnson

Government Relations Director

tom.e.johnson@state.mn.us

651-338-8955

Alexis Donath

Legislative Coordinator

alexis.donath@state.mn.us

651-373-9277

