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# New Report Will Show Extent Of GRU's Wastewater Spillage Incidents

By Alexandria Ng

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Pipeline breaks are more than a nuisance — they can be detrimental to the public's health.

The Alachua County Environmental Protection Advisory Committee (EPAC) is concerned about pipeline breaks and the sewage consequently released into stormwater systems or creeks.

"I am very concerned by how many times I do hear of a pipe breaking with sewage being released and ending up in either the stormwater system or in Hogtown Creek," EPAC Chairman David Moritz said in an email. "I believe it is very likely that polluted water high in nutrients and even bacteria are regularly flushed into the aquifer."

EPAC last month requested a report on Gainesville Regional Utilities' (GRU) rate of wastewater spillage, which is under review by the Alachua County Environmental Protection Department. The department's report compares GRU to other similarly sized utility companies in regard to the number of sewage pipe breaks that occur. The report will be presented at the EPAC meeting 6 p.m. Tuesday at the Seagle Building on West University Avenue.

Gus Olmos, EPD's water resources manager, says that the main issue from GRU spills is that people like to swim in Alachua's urban creeks, all of which have high levels of bacteria. (Alexandria Ng/WUFT News)

One of the main reasons that pipelines break is residential blockage, said Gus Olmos, water resources manager for the Environmental Protection Department. Many products that are advertised as flushable are actually not good for the pipe system's design and cause clogs that result in pipes bursting. This includes toiletries and cooking grease as well, Olmos said.

"It's not realistic to not have any spills, but we want to be No. 1," Olmos said. "We want to minimize the number of spills as much as we can."

To help prevent pipeline breaks, GRU advises residents to follow their three P's when considering what to flush down the toilet: Pee, poo and paper.

"We have 800 miles of pipe connecting every home, so we're operating a very complex system," said Tony Cunningham, GRU's water and wastewater officer. "We're investing a lot into our system to improve the infrastructure going forward, but we want to continue to get the message out to residents that their behavior makes a difference."

According to Cunningham, GRU spends about \$12 million a year to maintain, renew and rehabilitate its systems. This amount has increased 50 percent over the past five years.

"We implement the best practices in our system," he said. "Most of the spills that we respond to are small, and we'll disinfect the water. Of the spills that go into the creek, we quickly coordinate with other agencies to respond and post signs to keep the public away until nature takes its course."

When these spills enter creeks, there's not much that can be done besides sampling the water to monitor when levels return to the baseline, Olmos said.

"We work with the health department and GRU, but every time there's a spill, different people get called, and everybody does their job," he said. "If a pipe bursts into the ground, they'll put lime to kill the bacteria in the drinking water. If it goes into ponds, they'll suck it up and remove as much of it as they can."

The Environmental Protection Department, EPAC and GRU work together to test the water for coliform bacteria, commonly found in the stomachs of warm-blooded animals, Olmos said. The presence or absence of the bacteria is an indicator for sewage spills.

The main issue from GRU spills is that people like to swim in Alachua's urban creeks – all of which have high levels of bacteria, Olmos said.

"Usually, when people ask us about swimming in the creek," he said, "the answer is no because we don't know if there was a spill upstream or a pipeline fail the day of their swim."