

Sewer pipe ruptures

*By Tim Dudley, Jackson Hole, Wyo.
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A pipe that carries 40,000 gallons of sewage under the Snake River every day broke early Saturday, but an official said he did not believe much effluent escaped into the river.

Wilson Sewer District board President Tony Wall said a small amount of effluent probably leaked into the river, though he said the exact amount is impossible to determine.

The sewer district posted someone to monitor the system at a lift station at Stilson after two other pipes, which were unused, broke Friday in the same location. About 12:45 a.m., when the monitor saw that pressure had dropped, which is indicative of a break, he immediately closed off sewage flowing into the pipe.

"We did everything we could to bird-dog the situation," Wall said.

Unlike the other two pipes, which are bobbing in the river near the boat launch on the north side of the Highway 22 bridge over the river, the sewer pipe has not surfaced, so officials don't know the extent of the damage or exactly how it broke. The three pipes were supposed to sit seven feet below the river's scour depth, but officials suspect high water flows in the Snake this year might have dug into the riverbed and reached that depth.

Wall said it was fortunate the two empty pipes broke the day before, giving officials notice that the sewer pipe might be in danger of breaking, too. If the sewer line had broken first at a time when it was not easily detected, thousands of gallons of effluent might have emptied into the river, he said.

Sewer district board members will discuss what to do during an emergency meeting today.

Currently the sewage from Wilson is being held in a tank on the west bank and two trucks working 24 hours a day are hauling it away.

The tank holds a few thousand gallons, Wall said, but the trucks aren't waiting for it to fill before pumping effluent out. So far two trucks have been enough, Wall said, though others are available. He could not say how much the trucks are costing.

Sewer district officials hope to have a temporary bypass line attached to the Highway 22 bridge across the Snake within 10 days, Wall said. But he said that was just an estimate. He said the board is leaning toward building a permanent line attached to the bridge, if it can get approval from the Wyoming Department of Transportation.

Rebuilding a line under the river would not be possible until October, Wall said.

Wall said there is no plan yet for how to pay for the project.

The sewer district serves the equivalent of 300 homes in pockets on the west bank. The roughly \$10 million project to move effluent off the west bank and to the wastewater treatment plant in South Park was completed in late 2004. The project was paid for, in part, with specific purpose excise tax money and was designed to reduce septic tank use in a region of the valley with a high water table.

For now, Wall asked that Wilson users cut back on their use of the system.

"We're just asking people to conserve a little bit and asking everybody to do what they can," he said.