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Storms in the Bay Area have unleashed millions of gallons of untreated sewage water

Lesley McClurg
5–6 minutes

Storms in the Bay Area have unleashed millions of gallons of untreated sewage water

The massive storms in California have overwhelmed the San Francisco Bay area's sewage systems. Millions of gallons of untreated wastewater are pouring through streets and into the bay.

SCOTT SIMON, HOST:

California is being hit by a punishing parade of storms. Raw sewage has gushed through neighborhoods, flooded roadways, poured into San Francisco Bay. Officials urge residents not to swim in the bay or even jump in puddles. Lesley McClurg from member station KQED explains the toxic disaster has revealed deficiencies in an aging sewer system.

(SOUNDBITE OF RUSHING WATER)

LESLEY MCCLURG, BYLINE: The rain that fell in recent weeks was like a fire hose blasting debris through neighborhoods along roadways and out to the bay. Mary Spicer steps through a heap of garbage washed up on a beach in Oakland.

(SOUNDBITE OF FOOTSTEPS THROUGH GARBAGE)

MARY SPICER: I got to watch my step. Oh, so corrosives. This is a Nabisco Easy Cheese.

(SOUNDBITE OF CAN HITTING THE GROUND)

MCCLURG: Spicer tosses the rusty can. She usually spends the morning kayaking along the estuary. But right now, she won't even touch the water.

SPICER: I'm really upset. I'm very angry. And I'm really - this garbage, that sewage goes directly into our most precious resource - our bay, our water, our ocean. And I think it's almost criminal to ignore it.

MCCLURG: At least 22 million gallons of raw sewage have spilled into the environment since the storms began. That's enough to fill at least 33 Olympic swimming pools. And that's just the tally from official reports.

EILEEN WHITE: There's utilities that have had large unauthorized discharges that haven't even reported yet.

MCCLURG: Eileen White is the executive officer of San Francisco's Water Quality Control Board.

WHITE: I think they're still in the response mode. They're getting ready for the next storm.

MCCLURG: White says the pipes that carry sewage from homes to treatment facilities are cracked and riddled with holes that allow rainwater to seep in.

(SOUNDBITE OF RUSHING WATER)

MCCLURG: Oakland recently recorded its wettest day on record, overwhelming multiple points at the system. Andrea Pook is a spokesperson for the East Bay Municipal Utility District.

ANDREA POOK: The huge influx of rainwater exceeded our ability to move and treat that wastewater. It overflowed before it even got to our system.

MCCLURG: Nearby in Castro Valley, residents reported wastewater backing up into their drains and toilet paper flooding their yards. To replace pipes in that community of just 65,000 people, it's estimated to cost around \$500 million. Raw sewage contains pathogens, bacteria and viruses that can make humans and wildlife sick. Often, people don't think about replacing pipes until it's too late.

SEJAL CHOKSI-CHUGH: Pipes are underground. They're not sexy. They're out of sight, out of mind.

MCCLURG: Sejal Choksi-Chugh is the executive director of Baykeeper, a local environmental group.

CHOKSI-CHUGH: City councils just don't tend to prioritize funding maintenance of these pipes and making sure that they're upgraded and maintained properly.

MCCLURG: She says preventing another disaster requires multiple fixes. First, residents need to repair private lines. Then, cities need to update old underground municipal clay pipes. And finally, outdated wastewater treatment plants need to be overhauled. Just last summer, the Bay Area experienced an unprecedented red tide leading to massive fish kills during a heat wave. It was likely driven by utilities discharging too much treated sewage into the bay.

CHOKSI-CHUGH: So we've got wastewater treatment plants responsible for both of these really big problems. And I'm really hoping that this is a wake-up call for the wastewater industry and for the local government agencies to say we need to invest in better infrastructure around the Bay Area.

MCCLURG: Choksi-Chugh says the neighborhoods that are most susceptible to flooding are those closest to the bay shore where the sewage is discharged - often low-income communities of color. Scientists say torrential rain events mixed with harsh droughts are the new normal. And utilities must prepare for ongoing climate whiplash. For NPR News, I'm Lesley McClurg in Oakland.

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