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Cayuga Heights fixes sewage-discharge issues found in EPA investigation

No fine for the village

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An unannounced spot check by the federal Environmental Protection Agency found that the Village of Cayuga Heights' wastewater treatment plant was out of compliance with some regulations tied to its discharge permit -- though within acceptable limits on what the plant discharged to Cayuga Lake.

The EPA conducted the check last October, but sent the results of its inspection to the village just last week. The village provided the documents to this newspaper Wednesday in response to a Freedom Of Information Law request.

Cayuga Heights is not facing any fines at this time -- said the "Deficiency Notice" sent to the village.

The village has 45 days to correct the problems and notify the EPA, according to EPA regional Monitoring and Assessment Branch Chief John Kushwara.

Village Engineer Brent Cross said Wednesday that all of the issues discovered by EPA have been corrected.

The EPA listed seven issues on which Cayuga Heights' plant was out of compliance, five of which related to sampling protocols. Another related to treatment plant efficiency.

One related to the plant's actual discharge into the lake: "Sludge chunks were observed rising to the surface in the chlorine contact chambers and discharging into Cayuga Lake," the EPA's findings state.

That problem occurred because treatment plant staff and a consultant were still working to adjust a new phosphorus filter, which was installed less than a month before EPA's inspection, Cross said. The village installed the roughly \$2 million phosphorus filter, with village, state and federal tax money, in an attempt to cut down on pollution from the treatment plant entering the lake.

"We are currently monitoring this issue, but it appears to be taken care of," Cross said.

EPA sampling on treated waste in October found the village was in compliance based on what it was discharging to the lake. The agency tested for 13 criteria, such as pH, ammonia, and fecal coliform.

The EPA conducts these surprise inspections roughly every five years as part of its oversight of wastewater treatment plants and of the state agencies responsible for enforcing federal clean-water rules, Cross said.

October's inspection came six months after the village stopped accepting wastewater from conventional natural gas drilling operations, though there's no mention of drilling waste in the EPA's letter and Cross said the inspection was not related to natural gas waste.

In April Walter Hang, president of Ithaca-based Toxics Targeting, compiled information showing that some of the gas waste accepted by the wastewater treatment plant exceeded allowable standards established in village law. He wrote a letter to half a dozen EPA and state Department of Environmental Conservation officials asking that the plant be inspected.