

February 22, 2016

What caused the 15-metre 'crap bubble' on Lake Ontario? T.O. workers knew more than they told

By Jenny Yuen, Postmedia Network

E-mails reveal the city's director of wastewater treatment thought it could have been caused by a damaged part from a treatment plant. But the city...

Toronto Water bureaucrats acknowledged internally that a brown "blob" seen by a pilot flying over Lake Ontario in November could have been caused by a damaged part attached to Highland Creek Wastewater Treatment Plant.

But the official line from the city to the media was the plant was "functioning normally within regulatory compliance" and there were "no spills of any kind."

A pilot spotted what he called a "crap bubble" - a brown spot spanning 15 metres with seagulls flocking around - on Nov. 8, south of the Highland Creek plant in Scarborough. He was concerned it may have been toxic and questioned whether it was a spill from the plant.



Sun Media The city's director of wastewater treatment admitted treated effluent can at times become murky or discoloured and Toronto Water confirmed that was the case.

In e-mails obtained through a freedom of information request, on Nov. 12 - the same day the Toronto Sun published a story about the discovery - the city's director of wastewater treatment, Frank Quarisa, admitted treated effluent can at times become murky or discoloured and "it is possible that this is the source of the plume" in the lake.

"Since the plume appears to originate at a single point, it may be that one of the 16 diffusers on the outfall has been damaged - which could result from either storm wave action or boat anchors," he wrote to city senior communications co-ordinator Kris Scheuer and Highland Creek plant manager Martin Shigeishi.

"Toronto Water will schedule a diving inspection of the diffusers to verify they have not been damaged."

In her response to Shigeishi and Quarisa, as well to Toronto Water program manager Diane Chester and general manager Lou Di Gironimo, Scheuer recommended city staff leave out any mention of the inspection.

"I suggest we leave this out as the inspection would not happen until next spring at the earliest and the reporter did not ask specifically if diffusers were damaged," she wrote.

A diffuser pumps oxygen into sewage or industrial wastewater to break down the pollutants.

The FOI documents show a former Toronto Water contractor also contacted the department that same day, acknowledging "one of the access manhole covers was left off about two years ago and that's what is causing the blob. He says he reported it a year ago but it hasn't been replaced."

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On Nov. 24, Toronto Water commissioned a further inspection and "found that the access hatch had become dislodged and was the source of the plume," Di Gironimo told the Sun last week.

A marine contractor retained by the city repaired the diffuser on Nov. 29, the department manager said.

The city also insisted it retained a marine subcontractor in May 2014 to inspect the existing plant outfall.

"All necessary work and inspections were completed by the marine subcontractor and the outfall and diffusers were in working order," said Di Gironimo. How the manhole cover became dislodged - and for how long - is unclear.

Dave Gallagher, the owner of Galcon Marine Ltd., who has done work for the city at the Highland Creek plant, said the effects of leaving the cover off could result in pollutants going into the lake, though it wouldn't pose any human risk.

"You're dumping chlorine into the environment, which is toxic to fish and everything else," he said. "And you're not dispersing it further out. Just a blast of stuff coming out. The brown stuff that's not being diffused, that's the bacteria from the effluent."

Di Gironimo reiterated water that leaves Toronto's treatment plants "is fully treated, disinfected and de-chlorinated before being discharged into Lake Ontario."

Toronto Water said it has been testing all undiluted effluent from Toronto wastewater plants monthly since 2010 to make sure it's not toxic to fish. Mark Mattson, of Lake Ontario Waterkeeper, called for an investigation that should include Ontario's environment ministry.

"I think it underscores the importance of when citizens see a problem, they bring it up," he said.

"I think it's really important the city look into why, in light of the fact they should have known about it for quite some time, to investigate. The fact they didn't discover it until the plane flew over is alarming given that contractors were telling them things weren't in good order."

National Post