

CU sends animal waste to city sewers

Officials: Sewage plant capable of handling discharge

By Krisy Gashler • kgashler@gannett.com • February 19, 2010, 7:10 pm

ITHACA -- An accidental release at Cornell University on Friday morning sent 4,300 gallons of digested animal carcass waste into the city's sewer system.

Cornell asserts that the treated waste was neither infectious nor hazardous, and the city's Superintendent of Public Works said he didn't expect the waste to cause problems at the municipally owned Ithaca Wastewater Treatment plant -- though Cornell does not have a permit to discharge to Ithaca's plant.

Cornell is completing construction and final testing for the first phase of the College of Veterinary Medicine's Waste Management Facility project, which includes installation of an alkaline hydrolysis digester.

The digester works by combining extreme heat, pressure and chemical digestion to dissolve animal carcasses and medical waste generated by the vet college. The liquid substance created in this process has to be disposed of at a wastewater treatment plant, per Cornell's state-approved environmental impact statement on the project.

The digester replaces the incineration of animal carcasses, which the community opposed based on air-quality concerns. A Cornell-Community Waste Management Advisory Committee recommended Cornell implement alkaline hydrolysis instead.

The Ithaca wastewater plant is jointly owned by the City of Ithaca and the towns of Ithaca and Dryden. Cornell has been trying to get a permit to dispose of the veterinary school waste at the plant since at least January 2009.

The plant's overseers have held off on granting the permit until they complete a study on the types and amounts of waste they can accept without harming

the plant or Cayuga Lake, into which treated waste discharges.

While Ithaca continues its study, Cornell has been trucking its waste to a treatment plant in Watertown, city Superintendent of Public Works Bill Gray said.

Friday morning, Cornell staff began loading wastewater into the tanker truck of a hauler headed to Watertown when a system malfunction sent the material instead into the city sewer system. That connection had been designed into the system in case of emergency, according to a press release from Cornell.

Cornell called the city to report the problem at 8:30 a.m., Gray said.

The accident is "not very disturbing to us because the plant can handle the material based on all the information we have," Gray said. The city has the information needed for the plant study, but it's not in its final form yet, he said.

And the Special Joint Committee that oversees the wastewater plant -- made up of elected officials in the three municipalities -- has not voted on whether to accept Cornell's waste.

"There hasn't been a vote, and so we're not expecting it and we don't have a permit for it," Gray said.

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Cornell is the state's designated facility to handle animals infected with diseases carried by prions, such as mad cow and chronic wasting diseases. That issue has caused concern among some of the elected officials who will decide whether to give Cornell a permit for the waste.

The waste discharged Friday was screened for neurological issues, such as mad cow and rabies, and those tests were negative, Gray said, citing Cornell. Even if there were prions in the initial carcasses, Cornell ran its alkaline digester for over six hours, which destroys any prions -- that's why the Cornell-community group endorsed this method, he said.

Environmental activist and Toxics Targeting President Walter Hang sent an e-mail Friday afternoon to regulatory officials with the state Department of Environmental Conservation and federal Environmental Protection Agency, asking them to investigate the incident, and potentially fine Cornell.

DEC Regional Director Ken Lynch and EPA Regional Administrator Judith Enck both responded that their agencies would investigate the accident.

Cornell also is working with its engineers to "identify long-term corrective actions, which will be implemented before placing the system online. Those corrective actions will be shared with the (wastewater plant) and the City of Ithaca," according to Cornell's press release.