FOIA 2021-001987

WASTE

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John Stevens of Sentell Engineering, engineer on the project, said the hydrogeologic testing was not done because it was not required by the state.

"We chose not to do a test because (ADEM) didn't require it," Stevens said. "They told us that at that time the old sprayfield was very marginal at best. They said get another sprayfield the same size and we'll be in good shape. That's just the way it is, and we took their word for it."

The Alabama Department of Environmental Management has since halted the use of the new sprayfield.

"ADEM just fell down on the job," said Nelson Brooke, Black Warrior Riverkeeper.

"We saw that $4.8 million as an opportunity to look at the (wastewater treatment) facility and the creation of a state-of-the-art treatment plant," Brooke said.

Instead, the city chose to create another sprayfield, a rudimentary form of wastewater treatment. Brooke said it was a waste of taxpayer money because a sprayfield has now been built that can't be used, and the city's old sprayfield continues to leak more than 10,000 gallons a week into Freetown Creek.

"They could have built a brand new plant," Brooke said. "Instead they wasted it on more of the same."

Black Belt Citizens Fighting for Health and Justice, a group of Uniontown resi-

A spray field in Uniontown is shown Oct. 23, 2013. Uniontown is seeking an option more permanent than a sprayfield to address its sewage-leak problem.

STAFF FILE PHOTO | MICHELLE LEPIANKA CARTER

Cottonwood Creek, which feeds into Big Prairie Creek and then flows into the Black Warrior River near Demopolis. That spill of untreated sewage caused the waterway to be "septic for a stretch of at least five to six miles," according to the ADEM report.

Four years later, a 2009 ADEM compliance report found additional breaches at the plant that allowed raw sewage to discharge into Cottonwood Creek. According to that report, officials determined that the Uniontown plant "cannot successfully treat or even hydraulically handle the flow of wastewater that it presently receives."

The addition of more wastewater from new homes or businesses would worsen the problem and likely result in more leaks, the report said. That prompted ADEM to issue the administrative order for Uniontown to make the necessary infrastructure upgrades to fix the problem within three years.

new pump station and the repair of old sewer lines, and another $350,000 was spent on the installation of new radio-read water meters, which have actually saved the city on lost water, Stevens said.

The result is that the wastewater treatment plant is now producing a much cleaner product, and is within the state-required parameters for treated wastewater, Stevens said.

"It's much, much cleaner, and not even close to being the same thing (as before)," Stevens said. "The difference is enormous. It hasn't been this clean in at least five years."

But, the problem of overflow and seepage into nearby creeks continues due to the wastewater plant being at capacity and a huge amount of rainfall this winter and spring, Stevens said.

That's unacceptable, said Adam Johnston, coordinator for the Alabama Rivers Alliance.

"Hundreds of thousands of gallons a week are still leaking over there, at least 10,000 gallons a day, leaving the sprayfield and going into Freetown Creek," Johnston said. "It's a failure for the city of Uniontown, and ADEM is not enforcing any of this."

Currently, Uniontown is seeking a more permanent option than the sprayfield, including a possible 21-mile pipeline from the wastewater treatment plant to the Black Warrior River. According to estimates provided to the city, the construction of a sewer pipe, along with pump stations, would cost about $2.6 million.

"That would eliminate the sprayfield, which could be used as a backup for emergencies," Stevens said. They are seeking funds for this now."

Uniontown Mayor Jamaal Hunter could not be reached for this report.

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