

Broken pipe patched



A diver climbs out of the same area at high tide after checking the break in a City of St. Augustine sewage line that runs under the San Sebastian River, near Oyster Creek on Monday, June 1, 2009. By PETER WILLOTT, peter.willott@staugustine.com

Permanent pipe fix work starting today

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St. Augustine city officials late Monday located a 19-inch-long, 6-inch-wide gash in a submerged 1960s-era iron pipeline that caused hundreds of gallons of raw sewage to bubble up into Oyster Creek over the weekend.

The creek is now off-limits to fishing, boating and shellfish harvesting.

Chief Operating Officer John Regan said divers from Logan Diving Co. of Jacksonville, working with Cline Construction of Palm Coast, planned to place a stainless steel "wrap" around the gash, though the repair wouldn't be completed until late Monday evening. "First thing (Tuesday) morning, divers will use big saws to cut the pipe about 10 feet on either side of the gash, spool in a new pipe and place wraps over the cuts. That'll be our permanent fix."

After the spill was spotted by boaters about 5 p.m. Saturday, the city mobilized 13 pumping and vacuum trucks to suck sewage from lines leading to a pump station near Oyster Creek Marina. Sewage lines converge there and the effluent is pumped across the creek to the Riberia Street wastewater plant.

The pumping was started to reduce the total amount of sewage going into the broken main, so less fluid would be available to leak into the marsh. Regan said another, smaller spill occurred near Lake Maria Sanchez on Friday when heavy rains made sanitary sewers there overflow manhole covers and flow into the lake.

The volume of either spill has not been calculated, he said. City officials said the pipeline repair first required the tide to come in. When it did, divers located the gash by feel. Then a floating excavator called a Bobcat dug around the area of the break.

Divers were then supposed to go back into the zero visibility water and secure the wrap. These are stainless steel sheets lined with rubber, curled and secured by long bolts.

All day Monday, a St. Augustine Police boat patrolled Oyster Creek to keep out boaters and fishermen. The federal Environmental Protection Agency's web site estimated that 40,000 sanitary sewer overflows occur each year. "Untreated sewage can contaminate our waters, causing serious water quality problems. It can also back-up into basements, causing property damage and threatening public health," the site said. Regan said that after the repair ends, the creek will be closed for at least three days.

Todd Grant, the city's assistant operations officer, stayed at the break scene all Wednesday. Heavy rains entering the city's sewage system might have overloaded the pipe, or it could have been damaged when an abandoned vessel was dragged over it not long ago, he said. "We really don't know," Grant said. A state Department of Environmental Protection officer was on-site Monday, monitoring the city's progress. Khalid Alnahdy, DEP's waste water manager, said the agency was just taking water samples at this point. "We'll be evaluating the long-term impact, if any," Alnahdy said. "It's not uncommon (for old pipes to disintegrate), but we need to investigate and find out the facts."



A diver surfaces after checking a break in a City of St. Augustine sewage line that runs under the San Sebastian River, near Oyster Creek on Monday.