

SUFFOLK

A greasy situation

Increased costs due to Bergen Point plant closures have pumpers dumping illegally, with no one to monitor their actions

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Suffolk's grease-pumpers are facing a sticky situation.

The price of getting rid of restaurant grease has jumped about 800 percent since the county-run Bergen Point Sewage Treatment Plant closed its doors to grease two years ago this month.

Trucks are now traveling hundreds of miles to find legal disposal sites, and there are allegations that some haulers are resorting to illegal dumping or other shady practices.

"Ever since the price started going up, we're seeing less and less grease. Where is it going? Your guess is as good as mine," said Kevin Nolan, vice president of operations for Deer Park-based Earthcare, a transfer station for liquid waste. "Someone needs to take charge of this."

The true scope of the problem is unknown because it's underground, in every sense of the word.

Many haulers are suggesting that unscrupulous competitors are doing cut-rate pumpouts by secretly and illegally dumping grease into storm drains and cesspools, or by telling restaurants they're emptying greasetraps while actually just skimming off the top.

However, there's no way to know how widespread the practice is -- so far, no one has been caught -- because no regulatory agency keeps track of where grease, septic waste, and other non-hazardous liquid waste is being pumped and dumped.

"We think some operators may not be doing real pumpouts, or are pumping the stuff and just dumping it any place they can," said Judge Coleman, an equipment manufacturer and the president of the 70-member Long Island Liquid Waste Association. "Somebody's going to have to start monitoring this grease."

County officials say they are aware of the problem, and are taking steps to address it. The

Suffolk Department of Public Works is expected soon to pick a consultant to conduct a \$250,000 feasibility study that will explore building a privately financed disposal facility on county-owned land, probably somewhere in Brookhaven, said Ben Wright, the department's chief engineer.

So far, however, Suffolk officials have not adopted other fixes proposed by waste haulers, including stepping up efforts to catch illegal dumpers and setting up a manifest system that would allow the county health department to monitor where grease is going.

"We're going to continue the discussions with the haulers, with the department of health and the department of public works over the coming weeks to determine what additional steps we should be taking," said Suffolk's director of environmental affairs, Michael Deering. "We're looking into setting up some sort of a tracking system."

The situation is very different in Nassau County because the county-run Bay Park sewage treatment plant still accepts grease if it's generated inside the county.

Grease has always been a problem for sewer systems, not only because it can harden in pipes but also because its goiiness clogs metal screens and jams rubber belts at sewage treatment plants. Many landfills, in fact, won't accept "sludge cake," the solid residue of dewatered sewage, if it contains too much grease.

Cooking grease from homes is usually not a problem to treat because it's diluted in cesspools or sewer pipes. But restaurant grease is segregated into grease traps where it builds up over time until it's pumped out by a waste hauler. When those loads are dumped at a sewage treatment plant, the jolt of a 1,000-gallon slug of solid grease can wreak havoc.

"The strength of the waste is so high that it short-circuits your process, kills your bacteria and just turns everything into a big gooey mess," said Michael Reichel, superintendent of the Riverhead sewage plant, which stopped taking grease when Bergen Point stopped because "all the grease that was going there would have ended up here."

Instead, local grease trucks are now heading out-of-state in search of an ever-dwindling number of treatment plants willing to accept their tankloads of grease. Their trips got longer this summer when the Passaic Valley Sewerage Commission in northern New Jersey stopped accepting grease. Now, many of the trucks are going to Camden in the southern part of the state.

Two other facilities in Suffolk -- Earthcare in Deer Park and Clear Flo Technologies in North Lindenhurst -- are transfer stations that remove water from the grease and then send the sludge to landfills as far away as Georgia. The leftover wastewater is pumped to Bergen Point for treatment.

All the extra effort has caused prices to skyrocket. Restaurants that used to pay as little as \$65 for a 1,000-gallon pump-out are now paying as much as \$500, Nolan said. For

haulers, the cost of legal disposal has jumped from \$30 per thousand gallons of grease at Bergen Point to as much as \$240 to truck it to New Jersey.

Yet Earthcare and Clear Flo, both of which expanded their facilities after Bergen Point closed down in anticipation of handling much more grease, both say that the rush has been less than expected.

"The problem is not that there's nowhere for the trucks to go, we have adequate storage and treatment capacity," said Steve Macchio, who owns Clear Flo.

"The problem is that the legitimate haulers are having a tough time competing because there's no system in place that will allow the county to know whether grease is being taken to a proper place and disposed of properly," Macchio said.

Dave Galbraith, branch manager for a major local grease hauler, Russel Reid Waste Hauling in Bohemia, said he's heard stories about thousands of gallons of grease mysteriously showing up in storm sewers at shopping centers, apparently because illegal dumpers poured the sticky contents of their trucks down a manhole.

"A regular law enforcement person isn't going to have a clue what's really going on when he sees a truck parked behind a supermarket or a strip mall. He's not going to realize that instead of removing waste the hauler might be putting it into a storm drain," Galbraith said.

"We all thought there was going to be a big grease crisis when Bergen Point shut down because there would be no place for us to take it," he said. "But it turns out we can handle more grease than we're actually getting. A lot of it seems to have gone underground."

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