Two workers killed in Tennessee sewage treatment plant collapse

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Two sewage treatment plant workers were killed Tuesday morning in Gatlinburg, Tennessee, after the wall of a large holding tank at the facility gave way.

The collapse let go between 1.5 and 3.2 million gallons of untreated sewage into the Little Pigeon River. The plant was rendered inoperable, forcing the city to direct untreated wastewater directly into the river.

The workers, 53-year-old John Eslinger and 44-year-old Don Storey, were crushed under the wall's rubble. Rescuers searched for the men for 10 hours along a five-mile stretch of the river near the plant before finding their bodies.

The region has been subjected to heavy spring storms for the past several days, although officials with the Tennessee Emergency Management Agency have not specified whether excess storm run-off in the sewage system or other factors such as mudslides in the area may have triggered the collapse of the equalization basin wall.

The 40-foot-tall tank was made of 1-foot-thick reinforced concrete and was used to regulate the amount of water entering into the treatment system.

The plant was constructed in 1979 and designed to handle 3 million gallons of wastewater each day. The facility has been run since 1994 by Veolia Water North America, part of Veolia Water, which is the largest water management company in the world. The Gatlinburg plant is one of 100 municipal facilities that are operated and maintained by Veolia Water in the US.

The effective privatization of municipal water supplies and other basic services has advanced steadily in recent decades, under the claim that the "free market" can better deliver services.

Gatlinburg is located in eastern Tennessee's Great Smoky Mountains, a popular tourist destination in the US mid-south. The area is like much of the surrounding Appalachian region in terms of poverty and lack of physical infrastructure.

Gatlinburg city officials, wary of a falloff in tourism, have insisted that treated water from the Little Pigeon River will still be safe to drink. Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation spokesperson Tisha Calabrese-Benton appeared to counter the local assessment with an advisory to stay downriver from the spill and not come in contact with the water. "Obviously, we are not going to want people to have contact with the water until we know what's going on, until we can sample and determine what clean-up is needed," she told the press.

Eastern Tennessee's waterways are considered important ecological features, yet many are heavily polluted with rubble and silt, sewage, metals such as mercury and lead, and other chemicals that harm aquatic life as well as human health. This has been the consequence of rapid industrial and commercial build-up in sensitive environmental areas. Haphazard development, logging, and mining in mountainous areas exacerbate problems of flash flooding and mudslides.

The state's infrastructure is in urgent need of repair, according to a December 2010 report from the Tennessee Infrastructure Alliance. Storm water control, drinking water and sewer systems were listed as among projects most in need of upgrade.

Last summer, Tennessee sustained major damage due to storms, including inundation of Nashville and other widespread flooding (see "Nashville, Tennessee struggles in flood's aftermath").

The American Society of Civil Engineers calls for an investment of $2.77 billion into Tennessee's drinking water systems and $1.04 billion in wastewater

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infrastructure. Many critical components of the state's physical infrastructure are well over half a century old, having been built as part of the historic Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) project chartered by the Roosevelt administration in 1933.

In 2008, the Knoxville area just north of Gatlinburg saw one of the worst environmental disasters in US history when an ash dike ruptured at the TVA's Kingston Fossil Plant. The breach spilled 1.1 billion gallons of coal fly ash slurry, a toxic byproduct of coal combustion. The slurry covered hundreds of acres of farmland and waterways, destroying properties and wildlife (see "Worst coal ash spill in US history ruins huge area in Tennessee").

The TVA has been accused of dumping tens of millions of gallons of contaminants from its power plants every day into waterways, with the permission of the state regulatory agencies. According to environmental group Earthjustice, the TVA's oldest operational power plant, the Johnsonville Fossil Plant, built in 1948, pumps 20 million gallons of coal combustion byproduct daily into Kentucky Lake, a popular fishing and recreation destination. The TVA also maintains an ash impoundment "island" on the lake, which the Tennessee Department of Environmental Conservation has cited for multiple leaks and seeps over the past several years.

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