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EPA requires Quincy to spend \$100 million to reduce sewage flowing into Boston Harbor



Quincy will spend \$100 million to reduce sewage flowing into Boston Harbor, in an agreement with the federal government. Two girls walked along a breakwater on Wollaston Beach in 2020. JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

Two years after the federal government sued Quincy for discharging sewage and untreated wastewater into Boston Harbor, the city on Wednesday reached an agreement with the US attorney's office and the Environmental Protection Agency that will require it to spend more than \$100 million to repair its antiquated sewer system.

Over the past decade, in violation of the Clean Water Act, Quincy has discharged a range of pollutants into the harbor and surrounding waterways, including E. coli and other harmful bacteria, federal officials found. Sometimes, with heavy rains, outfalls from the sewer system spread sewage along the city's coast, including Wollaston Beach and the Adams Shore area.

The settlement requires local officials to implement "extensive remedial measures" to reduce the discharge of sewage and other pollutants into waters that include Quincy Bay, Dorchester Bay, Hingham Bay, the Neponset River, and Boston Harbor, which federal officials said would cost more than \$100 million.

"The work required under the proposed settlement will achieve cleaner and healthier water in Quincy and nearby areas," said Deb Szaro, acting regional administrator of the EPA in New England, who added that it would complement the nearly \$5 billion spent over recent decades to clean Boston Harbor. "This will protect people's health, making it

safer to enjoy beaches or other recreation in or on the bays and rivers in the area."

Under the proposed consent decree, Quincy will be required to abide by a schedule to identify all remaining leaks from its stormwater and sanitary sewer systems — some of which are more than a century old — and repair them as soon as possible. The work must be complete by the end of 2034.

The city will first have to review all outfalls that may be discharging sewage along local beaches. Quincy will also be required to increase monitoring of stormwater outfalls and post notices near them to warn beachgoers of potentially contaminated stormwater.

Quincy officials said the settlement would not be a financial burden on the city of 100,000 residents, which has an annual budget of about \$400 million.

"The agreement reflects our concerns, which includes a recognition of the city's past efforts on these issues," said Christopher Walker, chief of staff to Quincy Mayor Thomas Koch. "It won't cause any additional stress to ratepayers."

In recent years, Quincy has been spending as much as \$8 million annually on repairing sewers and making other improvements to its wastewater system, meaning the city is unlikely to have to increase its budget to comply

with the settlement, he said. Walker said that the mayor felt the initial fines proposed by federal officials were unfair to the city, and that he worked with them to reduce the penalty.

He could not say what federal officials initially proposed.

"We would argue we've been doing this work for a long time, and that some of this wasn't necessary," he said.

But federal officials said the city has to do much more — and soon.

Numerous studies have identified "significant and widespread" defects in the sewer system, including cracks that allow sewage to leak, they said.

"This settlement is a reminder that municipalities must comply with the law and environmental standards to prevent and address pollution caused by defects in their stormwater and sewage systems," said Nathaniel R. Mendell, acting US attorney for the district of Massachusetts. "This is a matter of environmental protection and public health."

Environmental advocates praised the settlement and said they expected the new plan to have a significant impact on the harbor.

Bruce Berman, a spokesman for Save the Harbor/Save the Bay, an environmental advocacy group that regularly monitors local water quality, called the agreement a "transformative" moment for Quincy.

For years, the group has been testing the water at more than a dozen urban beaches in the metropolitan area, and Wollaston has typically done worse than most of the others.

In the group's most recent report, Wollaston failed 13 percent of water quality tests in 2019, meaning that it wasn't considered safe for swimming. Over a longer stretch dating to 2014, Wollaston passed an average of 91 percent of the water tests, ranking it in the

bottom third of 15 beaches monitored.

That's a good number for an urban beach, but they could do better," Berman said. "These investments will be transformative, and take the beach from good to great."

Officials in Quincy note the city helped spur the massive cleanup of Boston Harbor when it sued a state agency, the Metropolitan District Commission, in the 1980s. The MDC at the time operated a treatment plant on Nut Island that pumped raw sewage into the surrounding waters.

That case culminated with a federal judge ordering the multibillion-dollar harbor cleanup that led to the creation of the Massachusetts Water Resources Authority.

Berman and local officials said Quincy got a raw deal compared to Boston and other communities that received significantly more federal funding to repair their sewer systems and reduce pollution into the harbor. Quincy received relatively little from the federal government, mainly because its problems were determined to stem from its stormwater system, not its sewage system, Berman said.

"There's little question, going back multiple decades, that Quincy wasn't treated as equally as other communities," Walker said.

That explained why some local officials were outraged when the federal government sued the city.

"The lawsuit ignored all the effort the city has put into this over many, many years, which includes a lot of local money," Walker said.

But through negotiations with the EPA, he said, the city is now on the right track.

"The end result shows good faith from all parties, and keeps us in a place where we're going," he said.