Tracking 4 million disks

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Created 04/04/2011 - 00:00
The job interview
The company behind the cleanup of Hooksett's sewage filters
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On March 6, millions of small, bacteria-collecting disks were released into the Merrimack River along with 300,000 gallons of raw sewage when the Hooksett Wastewater Treatment Plant overflowed because of heavy rains.

Now, Geoff Brown is in charge of picking up the disks, some of which have made it as far as Cape Cod. Brown is vice president at ENPRO, an environmental cleanup company with offices in Pembroke and Newburyport, Mass., that the town of Hooksett has paid $125,000 to get the job done.

In an interview last week, Brown talked about his company's efforts to tackle the challenge over the past two weeks.

Have you ever overseen the cleanup of sewage disks before? What's most difficult about it?

We've done a lot of large-scale cleanup projects related to petroleum or hazardous materials, but we have never done a disk cleanup project. . . . I think one of the challenges is the widespread nature of the cleanup at this point. The disks have traveled from Hooksett to the mouth of the Merrimack River and have traveled north along the coastline up to as far as Rye, New Hampshire, and south now as far as Cape Cod.

What do the disks look like?

They're about 2 inches in diameter, and they're very thin, with kind of a mesh in the middle.

And what's their purpose at the treatment plant?

They're basically placed in there to allow bacteria to grow on them so the bacteria can remove nutrients from the waste. There was bacteria on these when they were initially released, but the state of New Hampshire and the state of Massachusetts quickly collected them in the river, in the ocean and on the beaches to determine whether there was still bacteria. My understanding is, for all the testing, there has been nothing detected or very low levels detected.
If they're not contaminated, why go to the trouble of rounding them up?

I think that basically it's a large number of solid waste materials released into the environment. It's a solid waste issue and an aesthetic issue and I think also just a perception issue because of where they originated from - that they originated from a wastewater treatment plant.

How many are still out there?

The estimate in terms of what was released still remains 4 (million) to 8 million. We are working with the town to try to narrow that down. We have, in some cases, a very good idea of how many have been recovered, and in some cases it's more of an estimate. ENPRO has collected about 250,000 disks, and we've documented collection by other volunteers of about another 250,000. So that's about half a million disks.

There was another contractor hired by the state of Massachusetts when it first occurred, and they collected more than 100,000 disks. Some of the coastal towns in New Hampshire started immediately recovering disks, but those have already been disposed of so it's difficult to determine exactly how many they recovered. But that may be on the order of half a million to a million disks that were recovered immediately. And there are people all over, people doing volunteer work or beach walkers, who are collecting them, and it's difficult to keep track of those.

How have you been tracking them?

We've had great assistance. There's been a lot of media attention, and the two state regulatory agencies, the New Hampshire (Department of Environmental Services) and the (Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection) have gotten word out to a lot of residents and a lot of towns about the issue. We're getting a lot of feedback from those same entities.

How many employees do you have out collecting the disks?

It varies from day to day, but I would say it's typically been four to five crews of three people. We have people receiving phone calls from towns or residents about disk locations or out scouting locations a day before, and then we have crews out responding.

How long do you think the cleanup is going to take?

Right now, I suspect most of the disks will be recovered over the course of a matter of weeks or a month. Then there very likely will be some residual disks that may continue to show up on beaches for months.

If people are walking along the beach and see disks, can they pick them up?

Right now what the New Hampshire DES is recommending ... is that all the testing indicates that there are low to nondetectable levels of bacteria but people should err on the side of caution. So they just simply recommend wearing gloves, and while you're picking them up do not smoke or eat or drink. And then, when you finish picking them up, you can dispose of the disks and the gloves as trash.

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