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Shiprock leak to be plugged by Feb. 17

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SHIPROCK — The Navajo Tribal Utility Authority released an updated public advisory regarding the wastewater leak in Shiprock.

The leak occurred when an underground sewer pipe was breached Dec. 5 at the Shiprock Wastewater Treatment Facility. The leak is only liquid, and solids are contained in the pipe, the public notice states. The project to replace the sewage pipe is scheduled to be completed Feb. 17.

The leak is not having a significant impact on the river, according to the advisory. The leak is estimated to be 0.006 percent of the river flow. It's estimated 17 gallons of wastewater liquid are leaking into the river every minute while the average river flow is 297,554 gallons per minute, according to data published by the U.S. Geological Survey, a governmental science agency.

The utility authority is taking twice daily samples for E. coli bacteria in the river. The test results indicate no apparent elevation in normal E. coli bacteria concentrations in the river water downstream of the leak at test locations 200 yards and 1,800 yards downstream, the advisory states.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency issued a Clean Water Act compliance order Dec. 21, stating the utility authority's National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System Permit prohibits discharges other than those specifically authorized by the permit.

"The permit requires NTUA to take all reasonable steps to minimize or prevent any unauthorized discharge which has a reasonable likelihood of adversely affecting human health or the environment," the compliance order stated.

The utility authority assured the wastewater leak is not connected to the potable water supply for Shiprock. The drinking water distributed to the region is from the city of Farmington's system and no San Juan River water enters the drinking water system beyond the Farmington connection, the utility authority stated.

Navajo Tribal Utility Authority, Navajo Engineering Construction Authority and Canyon Construction Co. are working on replacing the aging cast-iron sewage pipes that cross under the San Juan River.

The utility authority will replace the corroded material of the pipes, which were constructed in 1963, with high-density polyethylene 12-inch pipes. The horizontal

directional drilling is being conducted at 27 feet below the river surface. Once that is completed, the aging sewage pipes will be pulled out and the polyethylene pipes will be pulled into place using machinery.

The work is expected to resume this week.

In an email, Margot Perez-Sullivan, of the U.S. EPA Region 9 in San Francisco, wrote under the administrative order, the EPA is requiring daily monitoring, disinfection of wastewater ponded on the surface, restricted access to the area, posting of warning signs and regular public notice updates.

The Navajo EPA has authority under the Navajo Nation Clean Water Act, has been providing input to the U.S. EPA and has been involved in discussions on the response and enforcement process since the spill was reported, she added.

"Speculating about penalties is premature," Perez-Sullivan said. "The Clean Water Act allows for a statutory maximum penalty of up to \$37,500 per day."