

## Cutting the crap

When it comes to spills, Utilities has been cleaning up its act  
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Post-storm work has helped protect wastewater pipes.  
Photo by Courtesy Colorado Springs Utilities

In 1999, flooding wiped out large portions of the Colorado Springs Utilities collection and treatment system, releasing 68 million gallons of untreated sewage into streams.

There would soon be more spills. Lots of bad press. More finger-pointing from Pueblo leaders angry that Colorado Springs waste was flowing downstream, into their community. There would even be lawsuits, one of which is still unresolved.

What a shitstorm.

While this was happening, Utilities was struggling to push the Southern Delivery System, a massive water project that

Colorado Springs leaders say is needed to provide drinking water in future years. That project requires cooperation from Pueblo — the city where the Springs-owned water is located — and a good environmental record.

Today, the latter piece of the puzzle is coming together. Utilities' last major raw sewage spill happened nearly three years ago. In 2007, the city-owned utility spilled around 1,000 gallons of sewage; it treats about 40 million gallons a day.

### Hoping for the best

Given gleaming new water-quality studies, it seems likely that SDS will be considered environmentally sound enough to gain approval by the Bureau of Reclamation next year. Then, Utilities will have to work out land-use issues with Pueblo. But reps say even that task now looks more plausible.

"I'm very optimistic," says SDS project manager John Fredell.

This won't do much to assuage customers who just this week were told to expect a 23 percent increase in utility bills this winter, but it's a fact: From 2000 to 2008, Utilities invested more than \$100 million in the inspection and upgrading of wastewater pipes, according to spokesman Steve Berry.

In the next few years, Berry expects spending to reach \$250 million. And the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment, which oversees Utilities and has mandated improvements to the wastewater system, says improvements have followed.

Writes Steve Gunderson, director of the department's Water Quality Control Division, in an e-mail: "Raw sewage spills since [January 2006] have greatly diminished in size, which is remarkable given the magnitude of spills in prior to 2006 and the size of the Colorado Springs sewer system, which is the largest system with respect to number of miles of sewer lines in the state."

Berry says Utilities has been upgrading, repairing and replacing sewage pipes, a project it expects to complete by 2015. It now sends crews to check pipes for damage after storms. It has installed about 2,500 locking manhole covers to prevent vandalism. It has upgraded treatment plants and pumping stations, and installed the Fountain Creek Recovery System, a \$10.5 million emergency system — yet to be used — that can capture and treat up to 18 million gallons of water from Fountain Creek if a spill occurs.

Meanwhile, the city's Stormwater Enterprise is helping to control erosion and sediment in the city's waterways, a major cause of damage to utility lines in the past.

"We couldn't have the same impact separately that we can have together," says Stormwater Enterprise manager Ken Sampley.

Ross Vincent, a member of the Sangre de Cristo Group of the Sierra Club, says that work is good and necessary, but he wonders if Utilities has done enough.

"I don't know if we're not hearing about [spills] because they're not being reported anymore," Vincent says.

The Sierra Club sued Utilities in 2005, accusing the utility of violating the Clean Water Act. (In 2005, two large spills, one caused by vandalism and another by a flash flood, dumped more than 300,000 gallons of raw sewage into Fountain Creek.) That trial concluded earlier this year, but a judge has yet to render a verdict.

### **Special delivery**

The Southern Delivery System could be functioning by 2012.

After years of struggle, SDS is moving closer to reality. The Bureau of Reclamation recently tweaked Utilities' preferred layout for the system. Among the changes: Utilities would need to use Upper Williams Creek Reservoir instead of Jimmy Camp Creek Reservoir for terminal storage.

The change would protect wetlands and cultural and paleontological sites in the Jimmy Camp Creek area, but also would increase the price tag on the preferred option — already approximately \$1 billion — by about \$19 million. Utilities says it would make up \$12 million with savings on maintenance and operation, and would also realize millions in savings by not having to mitigate the Jimmy Camp area.

The bureau is currently taking public input on the updated option. It could still choose one of the other, more expensive, alternatives Utilities presented, or turn down the plan all together.

While it weighs its decision, Utilities is trying to resolve land use issues with Pueblo. If an agreement can't be reached, Utilities would have to stray from its preferred option and take a different route, costing an extra \$100 to \$150 million.

"Pueblo County wants to do what's in the best interests of their community, and that's understandable," Berry says. "I think it would be premature to promise some kind of timeline on that."

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The Bureau of Reclamation will accept public comments on CSU's amended preferred option through Nov. 24.

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The Bureau will host an open house on Oct. 29. Check [sdseis.com/events.html](http://sdseis.com/events.html) for details.

Utilities is hosting open houses on SDS on Oct. 16, 23, 27 and 30. Check [sdswater.org](http://sdswater.org) for details.