



CITY OF ATLANTA

City Auditor's Office
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Why We Did This Audit

We undertook this audit to assess the Department of Watershed Management's efforts to comply with the 1998 combined sewer overflow consent decree, aimed at eliminating water quality violations caused by combined sewer overflows.

What We Recommended

To manage remaining risks to the combined sewer overflow facilities and continue to reduce the number of water quality violations, the Commissioner of Watershed Management should:

- Develop an ongoing budget to cover future maintenance needs and help eliminate the current backlog.
- Measure the amount of catch basin debris removed, identify areas with basins that generate high amounts, and develop a schedule to clean those areas on a more frequent basis.
- Determine the best and most cost-effective mix of catch basin cleaning and street sweeping to maximize resources while reducing the amount of debris and pollutants entering the combined sewer system.
- Determine whether more frequent street sweeping would reduce the amount of catch basin cleaning needed. Once the department determines an ideal frequency, it should develop a service level agreement with the Department of Public Works and include those expectations.
- Continue community outreach, recycling, and other efforts to manage litter and debris within the city and consider whether to expand or hold these events more frequently.

For more information regarding this report, please contact Stephanie Jackson at 404.330.6678 or sjackson@atlantaga.gov.

Performance Audit:

Combined Sewer Overflow Consent Decree Impact

What We Found

Completion of the consent decree projects appears to have significantly improved water quality. Despite these improvements, deferred maintenance and street level debris pose ongoing compliance risks.

Since Watershed management completed the projects related to the combined sewer overflow projects in late 2008, average annual water quality violations have decreased by 65% through July 2013. The city averaged 8.3 water quality violations per year at combined sewer facilities between 1998 and 2008, and averaged 2.9 violations per year after the projects were completed. Also, the severity of violations decreased after the improvements were completed. While most violations were for exceeding fecal coliform bacteria standards in the water discharged to the Chattahoochee and South Rivers, these violations decreased from 74% to 43% of the total violations after the projects were completed. Department officials predicted that the improvements would reduce the number of overflows to less than an average of four per year. The system has experienced only two overflows since the projects were completed, both related to flooding in September 2009.

The department has accumulated \$25-\$36 million in deferred maintenance on the combined sewer facilities as it prioritized work on the sanitary sewer system in recent years. Some of these maintenance issues have caused water quality violations. Staff told us the department plans to resolve outstanding maintenance and repairs by the end of fiscal year 2015. The department should develop an ongoing budget to cover future maintenance needs and prevent another backlog.

Street level debris also poses risk as it can clog the sewer systems, damage filtering equipment, and introduce additional pollutants into the system. Watershed management periodically cleans catch basins and pays public works about \$800,000 per year for street sweeping. Public works reports that it sweeps streets three times per year. Increasing the frequency of street sweeping could be a cost-effective way to reduce debris entering the combined sewer system. The department should assess the impact of additional street sweeping and community education.