Sewage spill bigger than thought
3 million gallons escaped; folks still can’t fish or swim

By Sherry Jones
Staff Writer

The amount of raw sewage that spilled into Hewletts Creek on Friday is three times greater than what officials originally thought, leaving the waterway and its tributaries off limits to swimming and fishing until more testing is done.

A report submitted to the N.C. Division of Water Quality on Tuesday states that 3 million gallons of untreated waste poured into the waterway after a main sewer line ruptured early Friday morning. Officials originally predicted that about 1 million gallons escaped.

The massive spill has left hundreds of dead fish in its wake and has residents worried about the long-term environmental effects.

They’re also wondering when it will be safe to go swimming again. Fishing and swimming have been restricted in all waters between the Wrightsville Beach bridge and the Intracoastal Waterway near Peden Point since Friday.

Hugh Caldwell, the city’s public utilities director, said the revised spill estimate came after officials had more time to look at pumping and treatment plant records. The leak started about 7 a.m. Friday near the city’s pump station on Pine Grove Drive and lasted until about 10:30 p.m., according to the report submitted to the state.

The exact cause of the rupture isn’t known, but the line has been repaired, Mr. Caldwell said. The city estimated that the spill killed 500 fish.

For Kenneth Garm, who lives on the upper portion of Hewletts Creek, the magnitude of the spill didn’t hit home until he walked out on his dock Saturday morning.

“We like to go out there to feed the swans,” he said. “It was low tide, and we saw hundreds of dead pinfish. … This is the nursery for all the little fish. Who knows what’s going to happen over the next few weeks. It just hurts my heart.”

Meanwhile, Oyster Bay resident Cheryl Nabell picked up her newspaper Saturday morning and alarm bells went off. That’s because her children and neighbors had been swimming in the creek Friday.

She said she was worried Saturday about potential illnesses but didn’t know where to turn.

“There wasn’t enough information about the levels of bacteria in the water,” she said Tuesday.

Although no one got sick after swimming in the creek Friday, Ms. Nabell said her family avoided the creek the rest of the weekend. They did travel to Masonboro Island on Monday and swim in the ocean, thinking it would be safe. But on the way home, they saw toilet paper floating in the water.

“It was gross,” she said. “Now, we’re just staying away from the water.”

There’s no law that enforces the
swimming advisory. The state issues the advisory because it may not be safe to swim in the water. Signs are not posted because the state relies on media to get the word out.

In this case, news releases were issued within three hours of when the spill was detected. State officials said they don’t have any other means of letting people know about the problem, but they did ask the Marine Patrol to alert swimmers if they saw them in the water over the weekend. They said they don’t post signs because it’s too big of an area.

Divisions of Water Quality and University of North Carolina Wilmington researchers have been out testing fecal coliform levels in the water each day since Saturday. Bacteria levels have varied depending on location, with the highest levels Monday – about 3,000 colonies per 100 milliliters – detected in the creek’s south branch. The acceptable level is 14 colonies for shellfishing and 200 colonies for swimming.

Testing in the middle of Hewletts Creek on Saturday showed 270,000 colonies of fecal coliform per 100 milliliters. Subsequent tests in the same area of the creek found 21,000 colonies Sunday and 220 colonies Monday. Exposure to fecal coliform can cause health problems such as diarrhea, abdominal cramps and skin infections.

The N.C. Marine Patrol with the Division of Marine Fisheries is responsible for enforcing the shellfishing regulations, which temporarily prohibit people from taking oysters, clams and mussels from Hewletts Creek and adjoining waterways. The penalty for violating the proclamation is a Class A1 misdemeanor and could result in a fine of up to $10,000.

Mike Mallin, a research professor at UNCW’s Center for Marine Science, indicated that the tide is flushing parts of the creek and diluting the bacteria. At the same time, though, bacteria are being pushed upstream into areas such as the south branch.

The biggest concern now, he said, is that bacteria will settle into the sediment, which could produce high bacteria counts for weeks to come as people return to swimming.

“For a while, I would stay out of the creek in terms of wading,” Dr. Mallin said.

Many of the decaying fish have already washed out with the tide or been eaten by birds and crabs. Dr. Mallin said the bacteria on the fish don’t pose a health risk to other animals.

State officials said swimming and fishing advisories would likely remain in effect for several more days.

In addition to the tests for fecal coliform bacteria, the state also is checking levels of enterococci, a bacteria found in the intestines of warm-blooded animals, said J.D. Putts, manager for the state’s Recreational Water Quality Program.

That testing took place Tuesday, with results expected today.