

## EPA cites Columbia Gas for drilling leak under Olentangy River

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Because of a leak of a material called bentonite, the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency ordered Columbia Gas of Ohio to stop drilling under the Olentangy River in Liberty Township.

The EPA issued a "notice of violation" to Columbia Gas "for illegal discharge of drilling fluids directly into the Olentangy River." The discharge, EPA said, threatens mussels in the river.

Columbia said bentonite is a natural clay used in drilling to lubricate the path of the drill. The material seeped through fractures in the shale Olentangy River bed as Columbia Gas contractors drilled a path underneath for a 20-inch natural gas distribution pipeline, EPA said.

Harry Kallipolitis of the EPA said it's common for bentonite to escape through fractures in the ground, an occurrence called a "frac out."

But Kallipolitis said he had never seen a "frac out" occur in underwater drilling, only in dry land drilling, and called the incident a "worst-case scenario" for leaking bentonite.

"When bentonite gets wet, it swells, sealing any pores," said Columbia Gas spokesperson Steve Jablonski, who added the problem was spotted by the company's environmental inspector.

Kallipolitis said because of its sealant properties, bentonite poses a danger mainly to some small mollusks.

"We were concerned it would fill in some of the (spaces in the sand and gravel) on the river bed, potentially suffocating some of the mussels in that area," he said. The Olentangy River between Orange Road and Home Road is being monitored in particular, he said.

To move the bentonite out of the area, Kallipolitis said, "We coordinated a release (of water) with the Delaware Dam. The first plan of attack was to flush it out."

Kallipolitis said the Ohio EPA had yet to confirm whether the bentonite was "flushed out" of the area, because water conditions have not permitted further observation.

Columbia Gas must submit a plan to alleviate further releases of bentonite to the EPA for approval, Kallipolitis said, before continuing any drilling under the river. He said the plans also must be reviewed by the Ohio Department of Natural Resources and the Army Corps of Engineers.

Jablonski said the company is considering setting up "concrete risers" in the area where bentonite is used, so any potentially leaking bentonite can be "swept up" before it travels downstream.

Sand bags also have considered for the same purpose, he said, while a proposal to erect a temporary, inflatable dam was rejected.

Kallipolitis said Columbia Gas contractors have reported about 38,000 gallons of lost drilling fluid - a mixture of water and bentonite. Some of the leakage did not occur in the Olentangy River, he noted.

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Harry Kallipolitis

EPA employee

In addition to boring under the Olentangy River, contractors also have drilled under the Hoover Reservoir for the project. Boring under waterways is a "preferred method" of laying pipeline, Kallipolitis said, and is less disruptive than other methods, such as cutting into the river bed from above.

If plans go forward, Jablonski said he expects the entire 25-mile distribution pipeline project - called the North Columbus Loop - will be completed in January or February.

"What we really needed to do was to make sure we have enough capacity to serve our existing customers in southern Delaware County and to serve all of the new growth," Jablonski said of the project.

The pipeline, which has been in the works for over a decade, will stretch from Harlem Road on the east to Liberty Township on the west.