



RON GALPERIN
CONTROLLER

July 20, 2021

Ms. Barbara Romero,
Director and General Manager
LA Sanitation and Environment (LASAN)
1149 S. Broadway
Los Angeles, CA 90015

Dear Ms. Romero:

Residents of the City of Los Angeles rightly expect and rely on their government agencies to provide and perform essential services that improve their neighborhoods, public spaces and lives. They expect the City to live up to the high standards of service promised by City leaders and funded by public dollars. When a breach in these standards occurs, it is my job as L.A. City Controller to find out why it happened, what damage was caused—including whatever burden may fall on taxpayers—and determine the steps that can and must be taken to prevent similar situations from arising in the future.

Today, I am writing to get answers about the reported 17 million gallons of untreated sewage that was discharged by LASAN's Hyperion Water Reclamation Plant into the Santa Monica Bay beginning on July 11—an event that was both an environmental disaster and imminent threat to the health and safety of millions of residents in and around the City. We are now one week removed from this incident and significant questions remain.

While I recognize that further investigation is needed—and may already be underway—the lack of clarity resulting from LASAN's initial response to the catastrophe and the subsequent public comments made by the bureau concern me greatly. Angelenos deserve timely and detailed answers to the following questions.

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Notification Concerns: LASAN reported that the incident began on Sunday, July 11, in the afternoon, but the department’s social media accounts did not notify the public until after 5 p.m. on Monday afternoon—nearly 24 hours later.

- What notices did LASAN provide the public besides posting on social media? At what time were public notices provided, compared to when LASAN staff were first made aware of the problem?
- My office was not notified that this incident occurred. While that concerns me, I hope that other departments/agencies and elected offices were notified. When did LASAN notify the relevant regulatory entities and partner agencies at the City, County, and State, including elected officials? If those notifications occurred shortly after the start of the incident, why was the public left uninformed for so long?
- What criteria need to be met for incidents at the Hyperion Water Reclamation Plant—and/or other LASAN-operated plants—to trigger emergency alerts via the NotifyLA mass notification system?

Regulatory oversight and independent investigation: Incidents such as these warrant independent assessments by regulatory entities and technical experts to pinpoint exactly what occurred and provide recommendations to reduce the likelihood of future accidental discharges.

- Which regulatory authorities are responsible for investigating the incident? Has LASAN formally submitted any information to these entities? Will a formal report be produced by any regulatory entities to verify LASAN’s initial findings?
- Has LASAN initiated an independent after-incident report to verify what exactly occurred? When will this assessment be completed?
- Is LASAN planning on submitting a report to the City Council and/or Board of Public Works on the results of its internal investigation?

Prevention, risk mitigation, and financial impact: LASAN has stated that a large amount of debris (“...including wood chips and pieces of concrete, along with paper and grease...”) clogged its filtering screens and the resulting blockage overwhelmed the system. The fact that such a seemingly mundane sequence of events could lead to 17 million gallons of untreated sewage being released raises concerns about LASAN’s ability to prevent future emergencies at the Hyperion Water Reclamation Plant.

- Were the screens and other pieces of equipment that were overwhelmed inspected, maintained, and replaced in accordance with manufacturer guidelines and industry best practices? Has LASAN changed any of its inspection and maintenance protocols in the aftermath of the incident?
- Why did LASAN decide to discharge the waste using the one-mile outfall—in shallower waters and closer to beachgoers—rather than the five-mile outfall? Was this decision in

accordance with the plant's established protocols? Was the five-mile outfall not available or otherwise compromised?

- What protocols exist to proactively prevent systems failure from mass amounts of debris or other materials? Are there monitoring systems that could allow for more immediate identification of potential blockages? What are best practices at other plants for systems failure prevention, and how do they compare to our protocols?
- Did the Hyperion Water Reclamation Plant experience a power outage or power shortage at any stage before, during, or after the incident? If so, was the facility's emergency power supply activated in accordance with established plans? If it was activated, did it perform as planned?
- What specific repairs need to be made and how much will the incident cost local taxpayers?

Environmental and public health impact: Untreated sewage is known to carry harmful bacteria and viruses that can threaten fragile ecosystems and put swimmers/beachgoers at risk. Significant discharges—such as the 17 million gallons that were released last week—are especially troubling.

- What are the immediate and long-term ramifications of the incident on water quality, fish, and other wildlife in the surrounding areas? Given the lack of timely notification, what are the impacts on swimmers and beachgoers who were at Dockweiler State Beach or El Segundo Beach after the discharge began?
- In terms of discharges of untreated sewage at the Hyperion Water Reclamation Plant, what is the official threshold that triggers a public notification by LASAN? Please provide a list of all discharges of untreated sewage from the Hyperion facility, along with underlying causes, from 2016 to present.

A full analysis of the incident must be provided, but knowing more now about LASAN's actions and response will help the City and the public assess the true damage caused by the sewage discharge. To that end, **please provide responses to these questions by July 30, 2021.** I appreciate your attention to this urgent matter.

Sincerely,



RON GALPERIN
Los Angeles Controller