

The Star-Ledger

Feds to give N.J. \$229 million to strengthen Sandy-damaged water and sewage plants



A primary clarifier is up and running at the Passaic Valley Sewerage Commission treatment plant. The plant remains only partially operable more than two weeks after being flooded by Hurricane Sandy, spewing hundreds of million of gallons of only partially treated sewage per day into local waterways. Newark, NJ 11/15/12 (John Munson/The Star-Ledger) *(John Munson/The Star-Ledger)*



By Eugene Paik/The Star-Ledger
on May 02, 2013 at 1:16 PM, updated May 02, 2013 at 9:31 PM

Recalling how Hurricane Sandy spewed sewage out of manholes and spilled it into New Jersey's waterways last fall, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency announced today it has earmarked \$229 million for the Garden State to fortify water and sewage treatment plants that were damaged by the storm.

The funding is part of \$569 million earmarked for New Jersey and New York, which comes from the nearly \$60 billion in Sandy relief funds that were allocated by federal lawmakers in January, EPA officials said during a conference call yesterday.

"We need to do much more to build resiliency," said Judith Enck, administrator for the EPA's Region 2, which covers New Jersey and New York.

EPA officials said Sandy spilled 11 billion gallons of sewage out of treatment plants from Washington, D.C., to Connecticut. In New Jersey, 94 wastewater treatment plants reported Sandy-related problems, and more than 400 water systems were damaged or lost power, according to the state Department of Environmental Protection.

As further evidence of the need, Enck pointed to the devastation seen by the Passaic Valley Sewerage Commission, whose Sandy-crippled plant in Newark sent billions of gallons of sewage and sludge into the Newark Bay in the weeks after the hurricane.

The Star-Ledger

Repairs are still ongoing at the plant, which serves nearly 2 million customers in 48 municipalities.

Michael DeFrancisci, the commission's executive director, called the EPA's announcement "encouraging news" and recognition of how badly the damaged facilities need additional funds.

Sandy also clobbered pumping stations owned by the Middlesex County Utilities Authority, which is nearing the end of emergency repairs to two pumping stations.

The authority could build berms or other anti-flood barriers around its facilities, but may ultimately have to raise its decades-old pumping stations about 20 feet, said Richard Fitamant, the authority's executive director.

"It's an option we're exploring," Fitamant said.

The parameters for receiving the funds were still largely undefined yesterday afternoon. New Jersey officials have been charged with deciding which projects in the Garden State will be funded, but the process is still being developed, said Larry Hajna, DEP spokesman.

The EPA said up to 30 percent of the money could be awarded to local communities as grants, with the rest given out at low- or no-interest loans.

As of now, a project vying for the money must have been affected by Hurricane Sandy, and it must propose fixes that would allow it to withstand future disasters. That includes upgrades such as submersible pumps, backup power sources and barriers to prevent flooding, Enck said.

Municipalities are also encouraged to use the funding on storm-water collection projects that incorporate natural features.

Several environmentalists said the funding didn't go far enough. The Union of Concerned Scientists called it nothing more than a "Band-Aid" to an even greater problem.

"The federal government needs a nationwide plan to provide funds to all coastal communities, not just the ones hit hard by Sandy, to adapt to the changes global warming is bringing," said Angela Anderson, a director with the group.

Jeff Tittel, director of the New Jersey Sierra Club, praised the funding, but said New Jersey officials need to "step up" and do more to preserve wetlands and improve water and sewer infrastructure.

"We're far behind," he said. "We now have an opportunity to correct the mistakes of the past."