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Upper Blackstone and EPA Settle on Administrative Order Terms

Interim Plant Improvements Already Underway

Millbury, Massachusetts – The terms of an administrative order on consent (AOC) between the Upper Blackstone Water Pollution Abatement District (District) and the United States Environmental Protection Agency became effective May 1, 2014. The two parties have been working together for more than one year to structure the agreement which includes design and construction milestones for additional treatment plant modifications to reduce effluent nitrogen and phosphorus levels discharged into the Blackstone River.

The District is a public agency that provides wastewater treatment services to its member communities of Auburn, Cherry Valley Sewer District, Holden, Millbury, Rutland, West Boylston, and Worcester as well as regional sludge and septage treatment. The AOC agreement is targeted at bringing the District into compliance with the terms of a 2008 National Pollution Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) permit. The District had previously appealed several conditions of the permit arguing, among other things, the weak scientific basis that the proposed limits were necessary to achieve water quality standards in the Blackstone River and Narragansett Bay. Following an ultimately unsuccessful appeal and mediation process, the contested permit terms became effective in October 2012.

Determining the scope of additional modifications and associated cost estimates for necessary upgrades is all part of the AOC evaluations. Separate studies are included in the agreement for evaluation of facilities to treat normal 'dry' weather conditions as well as 'wet' weather conditions when storm flows or snowmelt can dramatically increase influent flows. The AOC terms require compliance with NPDES limits for all 'dry' weather flows by October 31, 2019. The AOC also includes a requirement for the District to complete an integrated planning report to evaluate recommendations for achieving permit limits during 'wet' weather flows. It is the 'wet' weather flow compliance that could require a massive and costly upgrade to the wastewater treatment plant. Last summer, the District initiated an investigation of measures to further improve plant performance in the near-term. Pilot investigations of some of these measures are underway and will continue into 2015.

The District has continued to optimize its existing biological nutrient removal process every year since previous upgrades were completed in 2009. These efforts have not gone unnoticed by the regional environmental community. Last summer, the plant's seasonal average effluent nitrogen was 4.3 mg/L and average effluent phosphorus was 0.19 mg/L. The current NPDES permit requires a total nitrogen level of 5.0 mg/L and a total phosphorus level of 0.1 mg/L in each of the summer months. Considering the relatively small 'gap' between current plant performance and the permit requirements, the District remains motivated to explore innovative as well as more proven conventional add-on processes. The District is hopeful it can select an approach that will minimize the cost burden on its members' sewer rates as well as its own 'carbon footprint' as much as possible.

The stringent permit conditions and innovative approaches underway at the District are likely to result in the facility becoming a regional or national model of how to address nutrient removal in a cost-effective and sustainable manner. For more information on the District see ubwpad.org.