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Piney Point phosphate plant leaking again, threatening Tampa Bay

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Piney Point, the shuttered phosphate plant that once threatened to flood Tampa Bay with contaminated waste, is leaking again, and state officials are once again rushing to stop a potential disaster. Meanwhile, millions of gallons of potentially polluted water are flushing into the bay.

The old plant, built in 1966, sits across from Port Manatee about a mile from Bishop Harbor at the southeastern edge of the bay. The port has been dredging a shipping berth, and had hired a contractor to dump the spoil atop the Piney Point phosphogypsum stack.

The dredge disposal began in April. On May 11, something went wrong.

"Apparently, there was a leak," said Steve Tyndal, Port Manatee's special projects director.

The contractor, HRK Holding, noticed a sudden drop in pressure and notified state officials.

"There was water coming out of that stack," said Suzanne Cooper of the Agency on Bay Management, an arm of the Tampa Bay Regional Planning Council.

Workers found pieces of torn liner — liner that was supposed to hold any liquid in the reservoir atop the stack where they had been putting the dredged material.

As a result, "we believe the tear may have been caused by mechanical equipment," said state Department of Environmental Protection spokeswoman Dee Ann Miller. HRK officials did not return phone calls seeking comment.

State officials feared the gypsum stack would collapse, dumping radioactive material and other contaminants into the bay. To relieve the pressure, the DEP issued an emergency order May 28 to dump the liquid into ditches that flow into Bishop Harbor, but monitor it for harmful pollutants.

They estimate the amount atop the stack was 150 million gallons.

So far what has been flowing out at the rate of more than 2,000 gallons a minute appears to be nothing but seawater from the dredged spoil, say DEP officials, but they are checking for contaminants such as nitrogen, phosphorus and chloride, as well as other harmful pollutants. Test results should be available next week.

Environmental attorney Tom Reese questioned two years ago whether putting the dredged material atop the stack was a good idea.

"I thought the water would weigh too much," he said. Engineers assured him there was no problem. No one expected mechanical equipment would get close enough to rip the liner, he said.

The DEP took over the Piney Point plant just south of the Hills-borough-Manatee county line in 2001 when the owners went bankrupt and walked away. The DEP worked to drain off the watery waste atop the plant's mountainous gypsum stacks, but record rains in 2002 added more than 200 million gallons of waste, leading to fears it would spill into the bay and devastate sea life for miles around.

So the DEP began discharging millions of gallons of ammonia-laden Piney Point waste into ditches flowing into nearby Bishop Harbor, spurring a large algae bloom.

As hurricane season loomed, DEP officials got federal permission for an unprecedented step: loading millions of gallons of treated waste onto barges that sprayed it across a 20,000 square mile area in the Gulf of Mexico.

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