EPA, Hawaii Initiate Joint Probe Into Molasses Spill

Audrey McAvoy, AP

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the Hawaii Department of Health said Wednesday they will jointly investigate a spill of 1,400 tons of molasses in Honolulu Harbor. Investigators will study whether there were any violations of the Clean Water Act, said EPA spokesman Dean Higuchi. "They're going to look at the whole spill incident and try to figure out who played what role and who was responsible for what," he said.

Keith Kawaoka, with the state Department of Health's hazard evaluation and emergency response office, said the probe will look at who was responsible. "We'll look at that, and based on our regulations and EPA's regulations, see what violations may have occurred and to what extent," he said. The probe is just beginning, Higuchi said, and he doesn't know when it will be completed. Up to 233,000 gallons of molasses dripped into the harbor earlier this month from a pipe belonging to shipping company Matson Navigation Co.

Matson said the molasses oozed out from a section of pipe it thought had been sealed off. That volume is equivalent to what would fill about seven rail cars or about one-third of an Olympic-size swimming pool. More than 26,000 fish and other marine species suffocated and died as the molasses spread and sank to the ocean floor. Last week, the state Department of Transportation disclosed that state inspectors saw molasses dripping from the same spot on two occasions since last year.

Inspectors first saw the leak while looking for storm water discharge in July 2012. The department followed up by notifying Matson and asking them to repair the leak. Matson said it checked the pipe but didn't see any molasses dripping from it. A separate state crew in the harbor noticed molasses dripping in May, but the department didn't tell Matson about this second incident. The department says harbor tenants are responsible for inspecting their own pipelines, and it's not the state's responsibility to check them. The spill happened in an industrial area about five miles west of Waikiki, the state's most popular tourist area.

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