

State extends supervision of Back River Wastewater Treatment Plant

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The two digesters at the Back River Wastewater Treatment Plant near Baltimore. (Kristian Bjornard/Wikimedia Commons)

Maryland regulators have extended supervision of the beleaguered Back River Wastewater Treatment Plant through July after Baltimore City reported problems at the facility following [an explosion in the spring](#) reported problems at the facility following [an explosion in the spring](#).

The state [took control last year](#) of the Dundalk-based plant after the city failed to act on multiple permit violations and sewage discharges. Environmental advocates have also filed a federal lawsuit seeking a court order to fix Back River along with the city's other wastewater treatment plant, Patapsco.

Operations at Back River were [temporarily suspended](#) in March following an explosion and fire at a contractor facility, which is operated by the company Synagro and converts solid waste into fertilizer.

The Synagro facility is responsible for receiving about 70% of the solids that are separated from the wastewater at the treatment plant, according to [a June 2022 report from the Maryland Environmental Service](#).

Baltimore fire officials this week released the results of their investigation into the explosion, stating a spark in the dryer ignited dust and caused an explosion that then ignited thermal oil. The fire was classified as accidental.

In the weeks following the explosion, the city reported wet weather caused the Back River plant to discharge slightly more phosphorus than permissible. And the plant's reduced ability to process sludge contributed to a short-term buildup. Two of Back River's tanks later overflowed on May 27 due to an accumulation of solids and pump failures, the city told a federal court this month.

State regulators will remain at the facility through the end of July because of the excess phosphorus discharge, said Jay Apperson, a spokesperson for Maryland Department of the Environment, in an email Wednesday. And the department is investigating the city's report that sludge was discharged five times in May.

The state has already extended its presence in the facility several times since negotiating a consent decree with the city last year amid "catastrophic failures" that resulted in sewage discharges beyond legal limits.

Apperson said the state will continue to conduct frequent inspections of the Back River plant, and require the city to take steps to mitigate the effects of the March fire and operate the facility in compliance with its permit, Apperson said.

He acknowledged improvements have been made since the spring, but added progress has to be sustained and the Baltimore City Department of Public Works must bring the plant back into full compliance.

“The plant is operating well and meeting its regulatory permit requirements,” said Jennifer Combs, a representative for DPW, in an email Wednesday. The department is working to improve its controls and increase inspections of tank levels.

Synagro also plans to install improved monitoring and control systems, Combs said. Meanwhile, Synagro officials are conducting their own investigation into the cause of the explosion. Company executive Layne Baroldi declined to comment on the fire department’s conclusions Wednesday. Synagro’s investigation is taking more time to complete due to the level of detail, Baroldi said in an email.

Synagro is working to return the dryers back to full operations as soon as possible, Baroldi said. Timing depends on engineering work and the availability of supplies and contractors.

“At the present time, Synagro’s is providing all City requested support to ensure continued operations and efficient biosolids management,” Baroldi said.