

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

September 21, 2016

COMMITTEES:
COMMERCE, SCIENCE, AND
TRANSPORTATION
FOREIGN RELATIONS
SELECT COMMITTEE ON INTELLIGENCE
SMALL BUSINESS AND
ENTREPRENEURSHIP

The Honorable Gina McCarthy
Administrator
Environmental Protection Agency
1200 Pennsylvania Ave., N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20460

Dear Administrator McCarthy,

As Hurricane Hermine moved through the Tampa Bay region, it left in its wake an environmental issue that appears to have been wholly preventable and, as recently reported in a whistleblower complaint, should have been foreseen and dealt with a number of years ago. Although the State of Florida is currently investigating the situation, I request the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) assist the State of Florida in assessing this spill brought on by the City of St. Petersburg.

According to recent reports, the City of St. Petersburg released about 151 million gallons of raw and partially-treated sewage into Tampa and Boca Ciega Bays. The exact amount of the release is actually unknown due to a broken flow meter out of the wastewater treatment plant. The sewage release occurred after the City's wastewater treatment plants were overwhelmed during Hurricane Hermine, a result of the City's decision to close one of its plants in 2015. I believe the residents of Pinellas County deserve to know what, and how much, was released into their waterways and how it may affect the water quality in the area.

It is troubling that the City itself cannot agree on what was contained in the sewage released, and this begs the question of whether this was a factor in City officials' decision not to tell the public about the release until five days after it occurred. In fact, a whistleblower, Mr. Craven Askew, claims the City was aware a sewage spill could happen and did nothing to halt the release. It is my understanding that previous spills in 2015 and 2016 were conveyed by consultants to the City as early as 2014, and that City leadership chose not to act and instead moved forward with closing the Albert Whitted Water Reclamation Facility even after being advised against it. It is important that residents know if their City leadership turned a blind eye towards the inevitability of a sewage spill at the cost of the local waterways and beaches.

Tampa Bay's waters are a cherished and economically fruitful ecosystem. I am concerned its rebounded sea grasses will suffer now and into the future, especially because we are not yet done with the current hurricane season and another storm could yield another disturbing spillage. For these reasons, I welcome the EPA's immediate assistance into this matter, and stand ready to work with you to fix these problems.

Respectfully,



U.S. Senator