

## MEDIA RELEASE

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### HURRICANE FLORENCE CAUSES MAJOR PLANT DAMAGE

ONWASA engineering and plant operators and supervisors have worked since Monday morning, September 17<sup>th</sup> to assess the impact of Hurricane Florence on the Northwest Regional Water Reclamation Facility (Northwest Plant). This morning, Wednesday, September 19<sup>th</sup>, staff was able to meet with a contracted wastewater engineer specialist as well as one of the companies that supplied major process equipment for the plant. Damage to the plant was severe, with floodwaters causing the release of approximately 3.2 million gallons of partially treated wastewater into floodwaters following the swift water rescue of two plant operators from the site during the storm event.

Excessive rainfall from Hurricane Florence caused widespread flooding that eventually reached a level of 3-1/2 feet in the plant's electrical distribution and control building, and nearly 4 feet in a separate building that houses filtration and disinfection process equipment. While the plant's emergency generator remained operational throughout the storm, flood waters severely damaged or destroyed electrical motors and systems that perform or control the treatment process. The water that mixed with floodwaters would normally have been pumped to infiltration ponds for disposal.

Floodwaters drained into Cowhorn Swamp. There is no evidence that the wastewater entered the sealed potable water system, which is a completely separate system. There was also no release of any hazardous chemical from the site.

ONWASA personnel were stationed at the plant around the clock prior to the event. By midday on Saturday, September 15<sup>th</sup>, flooding had isolated the plant and was beginning to enter the buildings. At 4:30 PM staff requested evacuation from the site as flood levels rapidly rose. Staff attempted to return at 9:00AM on Sunday, September 16<sup>th</sup> but flooding remained. Staff successfully returned to the plant Monday morning, September 17<sup>th</sup> once it was safe to do so.

Currently, the Northwest Plant is being staffed 24 hours a day while the damage is being assessed and systems repaired or replaced. ONWASA is receiving assistance with repair and restart of critical systems from a professional engineer with extensive experience in treatment plant operations, technicians for the manufacturers of major plant components, and two assessment/repair teams from other water and wastewater utilities through the NCWaterWARN system. It is too early at this time to establish a specific date for completion of repairs. It is anticipated that the total cost of repairs may reach into the millions of dollars.

The public served by the plant will still receive sanitary sewer service. After working around the clock for the last two days, a treatment process was reestablished at the plant around 10:00 AM today (Wednesday, September 19<sup>th</sup>).

ONWASA has been in daily contact with the North Carolina Division of Environmental Quality, Wilmington District Office and has fully informed them of the impact of Hurricane Florence and all recovery efforts underway at the plant.

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