

Officials looking for solution for Mammoth wastewater after flood

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Officials hope to reopen the Mammoth Hot Springs Hotel in Yellowstone National Park this July after over a year of it being closed to overnight guests because of damaged infrastructure.

The hotel's reopening will mark a step forward in Yellowstone's recovery efforts from historic flooding last June. Floodwaters caused extensive damage to park infrastructure, including the break of a sewer line whose damage dealt impacts to visitation in the park.

The sewer line carried wastewater adjacent to the North Entrance Road from Mammoth Hot Springs to Gardiner. When it broke, it dumped some 200,000 gallons of raw sewage into the Gardner River.

A year later, officials are still working hard on temporary fixes to cushion the permanent repairs, which the park says could take up to five years.

One of those temporary fixes is a new wastewater system for Mammoth. Once that system is up and running, the hotel can open to overnight guests. While its gift

shop, coffee and beverage service, and lobby are open now, the park has said the hotel and cabins won't fully reopen until after July 1. All tours departing from the Mammoth hotel have also been canceled.

Originally, officials set the reopening goal for winter, but moved it to the end of April. The opening was again delayed to mid-June, but then bumped to after July 1 as finishing touches and testing of the wastewater system are still needed.

An early start to a severe winter made things difficult for construction workers and caused delays, Cam Sholly, superintendent of Yellowstone National Park, said in a May interview.

Despite the delays, the project was still on an expedited timeline, Sholly said.

"This would normally be a multiple year construction project, and we tried to jam it into about nine months over one of the toughest winters," Sholly said. "So it was a little behind schedule because of how tough the winter was, but I feel pretty good about the track that's on right now."

WORK TO BE DONE

The wastewater plant that crews are working on for Mammoth Hot Springs is a temporary solution, Sholly said.

The facility cost around \$29 million to build. It's an expensive fix, but the area can't have visitors without a functioning wastewater system, Sholly said.

Long term, the plan is to reconnect

Mammoth's sewage line to route wastewater to Gardiner — but that could take several years.

The sewer line would follow the path of the road from Mammoth to Gardiner, like the last system did. But before that can be reconstructed, officials need to decide on a permanent location for the new road.

That decision is still in flux, Sholly said. Officials are weighing three options — rebuilding the road in the canyon alongside the Gardner River, fixing the Old Gardiner Road being used now by taking out some curves and steep grades, or building an entirely new road in between the two.

Each option has to weigh some risk for future flooding, earthquake and landslide risks and general road safety, Sholly said. The park will create environmental assessments for each option and seek stakeholder opinions.

“We just need to take time to pick the right options, and really think about these repairs from the standpoint of being an opportunity to rebuild in a more resilient way, so we don't have a similar situation happen in the future,” Sholly said.

Wastewater/

Once the new road is completed, officials will have to decide what to do with the new Mammoth wastewater system. The two options are to take it out completely, or keep it for future use if needed.

The second option would be good for future natural disasters, so the

park isn't in a similar situation of not having wastewater treatment capacity. Old infrastructure did prove useful in handling the emergency flooding, Sholly said.

Within 48 hours of the June flooding, officials diverted the broken sewer pipe from the Gardner River into percolator ponds, which stored Mammoth's wastewater from the 1930s to 1960s.

Those ponds have been in use since last June in Mammoth, with fewer employees living in the park this winter and the hotel closed to overnight guests.

While the ponds have been helpful, that system won't work with higher numbers of guests in the park this summer and the hotel at full capacity, Sholly said. That's why crews are working hard to complete the system to accommodate the park's peak summer tourism season.

IMPACTS TO THE MAMMOTH HOTEL

The Mammoth Hot Springs Hotel is ready to open whenever they get word from the park that the wastewater system is ready to go, said Rick Hoeninghausen, director of sales and marketing for Yellowstone National Park Lodges.

The exact timing of the opening is still in flux. Guests have reservations starting in July, but they've been warned the hotel may not be open by then, Hoeninghausen said.

"Though we do not want to cancel reservations prematurely, the opening date for Mammoth Hotel

remains subject to change, and we may not have a definitive answer for another couple weeks,” Yellowstone National Park Lodges said in mid-May release.

The park originally set an opening goal for April 28, then for June 16, but both were postponed following construction delays.

It would have been a relatively busy May and early June for the hotel, Hoeninghausen said of the closure’s impacts. In a normal year, the hotel has 83 rooms open in May, plus around 110 cabins that open in June.

Accommodations weren’t entirely sold out, but the hotel would have been pretty full had it opened earlier, Hoeninghausen said.

People who have to cancel their reservation get a full refund, Hoeninghausen said, adding that folks have been generally understanding that the closures are beyond the park’s control. Employees are working hard to keep guests informed about closures and give them advance notice to change their plans.

The park opened up other lodging options earlier than normal to accommodate the Mammoth Hot Springs hotel being closed, Hoeninghausen said.

Select rooms at the Canyon Lodge opened May 5 instead of May 19, and select cabins at Lake Lodge specifically for displaced Mammoth hotel guests opened June 2 instead of June 10.

The gateway towns of Yellowstone also have lodging options that people are being pointed to,

Hoeninghausen said.

Hoeninghausen said that while the hotel remains closed, he's optimistic it will reopen this summer, and that people shouldn't be deterred from

still visiting the park.

"The Park Service wants the hotel to open as soon as possible. Everybody does and every effort is being made," Hoeninghausen said. "It's just one hotel that's closed, but the rest of the park is open and doing well. There's no reason not to come."

IMPACTS TO GARDINER WASTEWATER

Mammoth's damaged wastewater system also carries impacts to Gardiner, whose water and sewer district has treated Mammoth's wastewater since at least the 1970s, said Josh Wells, the district's manager.

Mammoth was one of the district's biggest customers, Wells said. No longer receiving Mammoth wastewater means a significant loss of revenue for the water and sewage district, while their operating costs remain largely the same.

The district has been told Mammoth wastewater will eventually be brought back to Gardiner, but it could take three to five years and there's no official agreement in place yet, Wells said.

The system feels oversized now without flows from Mammoth, Wells said. Mammoth's wastewater comprised close to 70% of the system's capacity.

The decrease in flows doesn't seem to be impacting the treatment efficacy, Wells said, but it will take time to see the full impacts.

The floodwaters also damaged water and sewer infrastructure for Gardiner. The water main line that paralleled the Yellowstone River washed out in two places, and the sewage line also suffered damage that needs repairs.

Sediment from the rivers got into the sewer line, lift station, and lagoons used for Gardiner's wastewater system, all of which needs to be cleared out.

The town is using a backup water main line now, and did temporary repairs to the sewer line. Mitigation work to insulate the pipes from harsh winter weather was done in the fall.

Wells said the hope is to replace the sewer line at the same time as the old water line, which is set to happen within the next year.

But exactly where to replace the water and sewer lines for Gardiner is still in flux. Managers are hoping to suspend the lines above the river, if possible, to avoid impacts from future flooding.

The lines before crossed underneath the Yellowstone river. Every 30 years or so, it seems like one or both of them get damaged or washed out by floodwaters, Wells said, but moving them out of the river would help prevent that from happening.

Ideally, workers would build a new footbridge over the Yellowstone, and the lines would be suspended underneath the bridge.

But that solution is contingent on funding from the federal government. Emergency money from FEMA will typically only cover plans to put things back to how they were before a disaster.

That's why the town is looking into funding through the Federal Land and Access Program for a footbridge. The bridge idea was floated last year before the flooding to increase outdoor access opportunities for residents. Now, managers are revisiting the idea, and trying to get FEMA money to support suspending the lines from the bridge.

It's still up in the air if that plan will work, said Park County Commissioner Bill Berg. The FLAP funding awards won't be announced until at least September, and they're on a different timeline than FEMA payments. Work still needs to be done to align those timelines, Berg said.

If that money doesn't come through, it's likely the lines will be put underneath the river again. Customers in the small town can't afford to shoulder the cost of a \$12 million bridge themselves, Wells said.

Berg said the idea to move the water and sewer lines out of the river has been in discussion for decades. Natural disasters will continue to happen, and it's up to humans to make infrastructure as resilient as possible, he said.

"I think it's time we try something different," Berg said.

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Editor's Note

This story is the third installment in a Chronicle series looking back on the historic flooding in Yellowstone National Park and southern Montana in 2022.



Workers construct a temporary wastewater treatment plant near Mammoth Hot Springs in Yellowstone National Park on Thursday, May 4, 2023. The facility became necessary after flooding in 2022 destroyed sewage lines that ran under the washed-out North Entrance Road. PHOTOS BY SAMUEL WILSON/CHRONICLE/REPORT FOR AMERICA



A blown out culvert and sewer line can be seen poking out from the flood-damaged North Entrance Road in Yellowstone National Park on Thursday, May 4, 2023.



A broken sewer line juts out from beneath a flood-damaged North Entrance Road in Yellowstone National Park on Thursday, May 4, 2023.

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