

Harbour sewage woes prompt new diving rules

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A navy

diver is rinsed off and disinfected after taking part in a Halifax harbour cleanup Tuesday. (CBC)

Navy divers are taking extra precautions before jumping into the polluted Halifax harbour.

The sewage treatment plant on the Halifax waterfront broke down in January. Since then, 82 million litres of raw sewage and wastewater have been flowing into the harbour.

Leading Seaman Amalia Baptista has certainly noticed the difference.

"The worst part is when you're on the surface and you're getting ready to go down and you have all these things floating on the surface. Usually, you should keep your mask on and keep well sealed," she said.

Baptista and other navy divers were out Tuesday for a corporate-sponsored beach sweep around Point Pleasant Park, off Blackrock Beach.

Since January, they've had to trade in their wetsuits for full protective gear that limits their exposure to pollution. The decontamination procedures include rinsing with fresh water, using antifungal ear drops and soaking gear in chemicals.

"We don't want to get anyone sick due to the conditions," said Petty Officer Jeff Smith, a dive trainer with the naval reserve.

In addition, the navy has designated parts of the harbour near sewage outfalls off-limits for dive training.

The sewage treatment plant malfunctioned on Jan. 14 following a power outage. Raw sewage flooded the station, destroying several kilometres of cable and electronic equipment.

Municipal officials have taken several steps, including adding large deodorant blocks, to mitigate the sewage stench.

Baptista finds the water "pretty dirty and stinky," particularly compared to how it was when the sewage treatment plant was running. She said the harbour was much clearer then.

"It's sad to see all this garbage and all this raw sewage being pumped into the ocean," said Baptista.

Leading Seaman Robert Barker doesn't like the floatables, either.

"We have a few nicknames for some of the things we come across from time to time," said Barker, another diver.

Navy officials say there have been complaints about the foul sewage stench at the HMCS Scotian facility next to the sewer outfall, but no illnesses linked to it.

Officials with the Halifax Regional Municipality have said the sewage treatment plant will be fixed by the spring.