

Stonington firm searching for missing water

By Rich Hewitt
BDN Staff

STONINGTON, Maine — The Stonington Water Co. has a mystery on its hands.

Large amounts of water have been disappearing regularly from the system since October, and officials don't know how or why. It does not appear to be a leak, according to water company Superintendent Roger Stone, and the missing water is not running into the town sewer system.

There's concern that someone may be drawing water from the system either deliberately or by accident.

Either way, the problem is getting worse.

"It's bizarre," Stone said Thursday.

Since October, approximately 1.2 million gallons of water has simply disappeared from the water company tanks. It always happens on Wednesday, Stone said. Water usage almost doubles on Wednesdays, based on Stone's regular inspections of the water tanks. Usage returns to normal the next day.

"Since mid-November, we've noticed a large amount of water flowing out of the tanks," he said. "It's pretty consistent and it's almost twice what we usually use in a day."

Water usage on those days has increased from about 23,000 gallons to around 40,000 gallons. The most recent reading this week, Stone said, showed that usage had jumped to about 50,000 gallons.

The problem appears to be getting worse. Stone calculates that about 200,000 gallons was missing in October; it increased to about 400,000 gallons in November; and to more than 600,000 gallons in December.

"It's increasing," he said. "I don't know what amount we're going to see this month."

The water company serves 182 year-round and 97 seasonal customers. All of the seasonal systems have been turned off, Stone said. The water company has a limited water supply, and if the problem continues into the summer, Stone said, it could put a serious drain on the system.

Stone has discounted a leak, although he continues to check the water lines regularly. A leak doesn't start and stop once a week, he said. There's no indication that the water is flowing into the municipal sewer plant either.

"We've checked with the sewer department, and they've done readings at the four pump stations," he said. "There's nothing that shows it's going through one of those. There's absolutely no sign of it."

Stone said they have searched for chlorine residue in areas where the water may have been dumped, but so far they have turned up no clues as to where the water is going, Stone said.

"There's absolutely no sign of it," he said.

Stone speculated that the regularity of the water loss might indicate there is something on a timer, such as a sprinkler system. But he said the amount of water usage is heavy for that type of system.

Maine Rural Water, a nonprofit association that provides technical assistance to rural water districts, particularly in locating water leaks, has been to Stonington about five times to work on the problem, but, Stone said, also has not been able to discover where the water is going.

Stone has concluded that some individual or individuals are behind the water loss.

"Somebody's doing it," Stone said. "What we don't know [is] if it's malicious or not."

The mystery is a costly one for the water company. About 75 percent of the water that has passed through the system in the past several months has not been paid for, Stone said.

“The water use is not bad, if you’re being paid for it,” he said. “But we’re not.”

Water rates in Stonington are \$7 per 100 cubic feet. Based on that rate, Stone said the company has lost more than \$11,000 worth of treated water in the past three months.

The water company could recoup those losses if it can find the person or people responsible. The culprit could be civilly liable for the cost of the lost water, water company costs including the time spent searching for the source of the water loss, plus up to \$2,500 in fines for each incident.

While he continues to search for the source of the water losses, Stone is urging Stonington residents to contact him if they go anywhere where they hear the sound of continuous running water, or if they notice anything else out of the ordinary. They can contact Stone at the town office at 367-2351.