



GARY E. JOHNSON  
GOVERNOR

State of New Mexico  
ENVIRONMENT DEPARTMENT

Field Operations Division  
District IV  
1914 West Second Street  
Roswell, New Mexico 88201  
Telephone (505) 624-6046  
Fax (505) 624-2023



PETER MAGGIORE  
SECRETARY

PAUL R. RITZMA  
DEPUTY SECRETARY

## Memorandum

To: Tito Madrid, Director FOD  
Cc: Don Byers, Env. Spec.  
From: Darwin Pattengale, Mgr. DIV  
Date: February 21, 2000  
Subject: Lovington/Lea County Cheese Plant

Don Byers has uncovered a situation in Lovington that has the potential to place FOD in the middle of a liquid waste mess that we ultimately have very little authority to affect a solution.

For the past 3 or 4 <sup>weeks</sup> months, Don Byers has been receiving complaints of surfacing sewage in the alley directly behind the Assembly of God Church in Lovington. Each time an inspection has been made and after contacting the waste treatment plant superintendent, it was cleaned up. Part of the problem is a temporary, above ground, six inch line running directly behind the church connecting two manholes, which gets ruptured by alley traffic. The reason for this is because of a failed lift station at the first manhole, and to keep the sewage from backing up into the church. When pressure builds up, the sewage will blow out the manhole rather than into the church, according to the treatment plant superintendent.

After another complaint was received from the Church, Don Byers and myself visited the site on Feb. 10, 2000. The surfacing sewage is primarily whey from the Lea County Cheese Plant. We met with Mr. Ray Price, the treatment plant superintendent and finally got the "rest of the story". A new lift pump is ready to be installed at this site. However, if this is done, the manhole will no longer act as a safety pop-off and the sewage will definitely back up into and flood the church. The superintendent chose the lesser of two evils.

Approximately four years ago, the City of Lovington allowed the Lea County Cheese Processing Plant to connect a whey discharge line directly into the City's system at a point close to the plant that allows the discharged whey to run through most of the City's sewers prior to reaching the treatment plant. Between the connection and the treatment plant there are approximately 25 lift stations.

This direct connection saved the Lea County Cheese Processing Plant thousands of dollars by not having to install a pre-treatment plant. For three and a half years the plant operated basically one shift and the City's system was able to handle the extra load with few problems, or so it seemed. Approximately 12 to 16 months ago, underground sewer pipes began failing, pumps and lift stations failed and needed replacement, the treatment plant began a rapid deterioration process. Today the plant has basically failed completely and is discharging contaminated effluent.

Adding to this critical situation is the fact that the Lea County Cheese Processing Plant has been running three shifts, seven days a week, for the past four to five months. The whey discharge from the plant into the city's system has tripled causing surfacing sewage problems all over the city. The pressure is so great in the lines, that when a lift station fails, and they are failing at an increasing rate, the whey sewage blows out the manholes. Past complaints were remedied usually after they became a public issue, i.e. news of the incident appeared in print or on the radio or TV. Clean-up was immediate without regard to overtime labor costs.

The treatment plant superintendent claims to have offered solutions time and again and has ignored by the City Manager. The two solutions offered have been;

1. Construct a pre-treatment facility at the plant site;
2. Construct a direct sewage discharge line from the plant to the treatment plant bypassing the City's sewage lines completely.

Both are not being considered by the City. They will not force the cheese plant to do anything that might cause them to relocate elsewhere, and the City does not have the funds available for repairs let alone new construction.

We have been receiving a few complaints from others in Lovington, and they all say that we are the last resort as the city has repeatedly ignored their complaints. The treatment plant staff works with us with no problem, and even keeps us advised of other clean-ups they have completed that we do not know about. The City administration is also excellent with their "lip" service. They promise us complete cooperation and that they are working on the situation and that everything is fine....yet the problem is getting worse and the citizen complaints more frequent. We are addressing each complaint and it's working for now, but I would expect the complaints to start reaching you and others in Santa Fe very shortly. You need to know this and we need your input on how to proceed or back off.