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Diver enjoys doing the dirty work

By [Robbie Dingeman](#)
Advertiser Health Writer

For commercial diver Greg West, the worst part about spending hours groping his way through a 66-inch-diameter pipe full of sewage might be knowing there's only one way out if he runs into trouble.

West, 41, works for Sea Engineering Inc., a Hawai'i-based company that specializes in marine and underwater construction. This week, the city hired his company to help find the source of a leak in a major sewer line that caused a 2 million gallon sewage spill into Honolulu Harbor last week.

He thinks the team found the source of the leak on the second dive Wednesday, in three places where a steel pipe had corroded through, leaving two gaps about a foot long and 4 inches wide, and a smaller hole along the seam.

While most folks would consider diving through 600 feet of pressurized sewer pipe disgusting, risky and claustrophobic, West isn't fazed. "I don't really think about the hazards," he said.

Armed with the information gained by West, city officials are working to determine the best way to fix the holes in the pipe. City Environmental Services Director Frank Doyle yesterday said the repair schedule will depend on whether the new pipe can be fabricated locally and how long it takes for workers to reach the break.

Doyle said the break is in the area near the pavilion at Sand Island State Park where the raw sewage bubbled up last week. The city had already been preparing that area for excavation. And he said they also are looking at gaps in the joints between the pipes of up to 4 inches to see if they contributed to the leak.

What's it like diving in sewage pipe? Dark, even with a light, West said. "You have no visibility. It's just all by feel," he said. A radio link allows him to tell the crew on land what he's seeing or feeling.

He said special diving gear — which looks like something off the cover of a Jules Verne novel reprinted in the 1960s — protects him from contamination or direct contact with sewage. "You wouldn't want to go in there in a wetsuit."

After each dive, West and the other divers are hosed down and cleaned with a bleach-based solution in a several-step process. After working with the same crew for years, West said he trusts the people on the other end of his air hose and communication lines. "Basically, these guys have my life in their hands," he said.

West figures some risks come with the job. "I've had a few mishaps. People accidentally shut off my air before ... a few broken legs."

Even with some stinky exposure, it's clear he likes his work. "It's fun. it's adventurous. it's a rush," he said.

He said there are a number of companies that employ divers like him although he believes his company is one of the busiest.



Greg West of Sea Engineering, who dived through 600 feet of sewer pipe to examine it for leaks, calls his job "adventurous" and "fun."

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He thinks other things he's done are riskier than sewage diving. "To me, heavy construction is a lot more dangerous," he said. By that he means jobs in which a 35-ton beam is being lifted above, or when the team is fishing bodies and cars out of the ocean or diving under the ice on the Mainland.

Originally from California, West first came to Hawai'i at age 20. He has been a recreational scuba diver for most of his life.

He and his wife, Yoko, live in Mililani with their two cats. He admits that what he does for a living still makes her nervous, even after 15 years together.

And even after the decontamination this week, he said, the cats sniffed at him as if to say "where have you been?"

But West said he's done it before and expects he'll do it again. Even if it means the cats won't sleep with him that night.

Reach Robbie Dingeman at rdingeman@honoluluadvertiser.com or 535-2429.