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Sewer customers will get sprinkling credit on bills

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Customers who did not get the full summer sprinkling discount could get credits for the difference on one of their next two sewer bills.

The Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District will notify 147,000 customers eligible for the discount about the problem and coming adjustment.

Julius Ciaccia, the sewer district's executive director, said he and his

staff have been meeting with the Cleveland Division of Water and its computer consultants to devise a program to adjust the bills.

"Everybody's jumping on it pretty quickly," he said Tuesday.

Ciaccia said credits may appear within the next two billing cycles. Bills are sent out every three months to water and sewer customers.

Officials have not said how much the credits will be. Based on the projected cumulative savings expected by customers in the program and a

limited number of adjustments already made, the credits could range from \$20 to \$70 per user.

The Plain Dealer reported on Saturday that sewer district customers eligible for the sprinkling credit were incorrectly charged this year because the water department's new \$29 million billing system was programmed with the wrong rate. Most people were overcharged.

People in the summer sprinkling program are supposed to get the discount if they use more water in the

summer than winter. The discount is applied because water used for lawns and gardens is not then treated by the sewer district. Customers are charged the full amount for the water they use.

Ciaccia said the sewer district will review the accounts of 147,000 residential customers who signed up for the discount. The district pays the water department \$5.5 million a year to provide billing services on 280,000 sewer accounts.

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It's not known how many people were incorrectly charged. The computer glitch also meant that some customers received the discount although they were not eligible. Ciaccia said no decision has been made on whether to adjust those accounts.

The sewer district has already made adjustments totaling \$45,000 for 614 customers who

filed complaints. Total customer savings from the sprinkling program were expected to be \$3.5 million this year. Darnell Brown, chief operating officer for Cleveland Mayor Frank Jackson, said officials at the water department began discussing the billing problem with the sewer district in June. The problem was fixed Sept. 22, he said.

Some confusion occurred because the new format for water and sewer bills did not note whether a customer was eligible to receive the sprinkling discount. That information will be included on next summer's bills, Brown said. The sprinkling dis-

count starts May 1 and ends Sept. 30.

A water department spokesman on Friday blamed the problem on the sewer district. But Brown said on Tuesday that it has not been determined what caused the problem.

The Division of Water has been the target of criticism for more than a year because of billing problems and poor customer service. Jackson assigned Brown to directly oversee reforms of the department.

Brown said there is a commitment to have all problems with the billing system fixed by the end of the year.

Water department officials had predicted the new system would cure its billing ills.

The water department also will make adjustments for Strongsville sewer department customers who did not receive the sprinkling discount, Brown said. The water department bills 5,600 customers who get their sewer service from Strongsville.

The department already made adjustments for about 500 of those Strongsville customers and will be reviewing 1,000 other accounts, Brown said.

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