



A mechanical rake collects wet wipes that have gone through the plumbing network at a New York water treatment plant. Photo: New York Times

Dank mass threatens city with sewer wipeout

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New York is confronting a menace that has gummed the gears of plumbing networks around the world – the common wet wipe.

In recent years, wet wipes, long used for baby care, have become popular with adults for hygiene use. Some of the products are branded as “flushable” – a characterisation contested by wastewater officials and plaintiffs bring-

ing class-action lawsuits against wipes manufacturers for wrecking their plumbing. Often the wipes combine with other materials, like congealed grease, to create a sort of superknot. “They’re really indestructible,” said Vincent Sapienza of the city’s Department of Environmental Protection. “I guess that’s the purpose.”

The city has spent more than \$US18 million (\$23.5 million) in the past five years on wipe-related equipment problems, officials said.

The volume of materials extrac-

ted from screening machines at the city’s wastewater treatment plants has more than doubled since 2008, an increase attributed largely to the wipes. The impenetrable clumps gain mass as they travel, clogging pumps and gears. Then, there is the final blow – an intake of sewage that overwhelmed part of a New York treatment plant.

A City Council bill was introduced last month to ban advertising certain wipes as flushable.

Industry representatives deny they have operated irresponsibly.

Dave Rousse, president of the Association of the Nonwoven Fabrics Industry, a trade group representing wipes manufacturers, said most of the problems came from “non-flushable wipes inappropriately flushed”.

The group has teamed up with municipal officials and advocacy groups to promote proper disposal. But environmentalists say the industry must do more, calling for refined standards for what is considered flushable.

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