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Sewage fireball threat in blackout BY DAVID SALTONSTALL. DAILY NEWS CITY HALL BUREAU CHIEF Thursday, February 9th, 2006

"A sewage treatment plant in Harlem nearly exploded into a "catastrophic" fireball during the 2003 blackout - a disaster only averted by a city worker armed with an old broomstick, new records show.

But records also show that DEP screwups at another plant, the North River Wastewater Treatment Plant between 137th and 145th Sts. on the Hudson River in Harlem, nearly caused a huge fireball that could have threatened nearby homes. "We have been advised," wrote U.S. Attorney Michael Garcia in a memo to the court last month, "that this situation created the risk of a catastrophic explosion near a residential neighborhood."

Garcia's investigators concluded that when the blackout hit, the lack of working generators at North River caused a flame that safely burns methane gas at the plant to go out, much like a pilot light going out inside a boiler.

With the burner extinguished, methane gas slowly built up - creating a time bomb that was defused only after "a DEP employee, at considerable risk to himself," lit an old broomstick and reignited the burner, records show.

The actions of the employee - who was not identified in court papers or by the DEP yesterday - assured that "excess gas could be burned off and an explosion avoided," Garcia concluded.

DEP officials yesterday disputed that any real danger existed and argued that the plant is designed to safely vent methane gas, even in the absence of electricity. "We deny that there could be a catastrophic explosion," said DEP spokesman Charles Sturcken, whose agency agreed to submit to federal oversight of its wastewater operations for three years as a result of lapses exposed in the blackout.

But news of the methane mixup yesterday outraged some Harlem leaders, who as recently as Monday were briefed by DEP officials on plans to install new backup generators at the plant but were not told of any past problems.

"I am disappointed that this has not been known by more people in the community," said Jordi Reyes-Mont Blanc, chairman of Community Board 9 in West Harlem.

"I'm an old Marine and I have been blown up several times," Reyes-Mont Blanc added. "So when I read 'catastrophic,' I can really visualize the fires of hell."