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TESTING SEWAGE FOR COVID-19

Remnants of the COVID-19 virus have been detected in raw sewage across Sydney as part of a new research program undertaken by NSW Health and Sydney Water.

NSW Chief Health Officer Kerry Chant said sewage testing for molecular markers of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, started in July, adding another tool in the fight against the global pandemic.

“This is early days for this research, and we have a lot of work to do analysing our findings, but it’s one more way we can strengthen our fight against COVID-19,” Dr Chant said.

“This is a program that will show us where COVID-19 has been. For instance, we would expect to see viral fragments in Sydney sewage where we have consistently had cases in the community or in hotel quarantine

“However, if we continue to have very few active cases, there is scope for this testing to provide early warning in places without known or recent cases.

There is no evidence COVID-19 is transmitted via wastewater systems.

Sydney Water laboratories commenced testing raw sewage from plants at Bondi, Malabar, North Head, Cronulla, St Marys, Quakers Hill, Rouse Hill, Penrith, Shellharbour and Winmalee in the Blue Mountains about two weeks ago.

The first round of samples found positive results at Bondi, Malabar, and Winmalee. Further sampling and analysis are required to assess the significance of this initial positive result.

Sydney Water’s General Manager Customer, Strategy and Engagement, Maryanne Graham, said the wastewater network can provide data to help the health response to the pandemic.

“The virus is susceptible to current treatment processes which are effective in deactivating the virus and there is no risk to the public or to staff who are trained to complete this testing,” Ms Graham said.

Ms Graham said Sydney Water was also supporting NSW Health by analysing samples from regional areas including the Hunter, the North Coast, Southern and Western NSW.