



Enforcement News

CENTRAL COAST REGION REGIONAL WATER QUALITY CONTROL BOARD

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Central Coast Water Board Sets Civil Liability Hearing on
1.1 Million Gallon Sewage Spill in South San Luis Obispo County
Negotiations with South San Luis Obispo County Sanitation District End in Impasse
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A dispute over liability for a sanitary sewer overflow within the South San Luis Obispo County Sanitation District that fouled homes, surface and ocean waterways and an estuary will be heard by the Central Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board (Regional Water Board) in September.

The Administrative Civil Liability Complaint stems from an overflow on Dec. 19, 2010, that spilled more than 1.1 million gallons of waste water into homes in the City of Oceano, Oceano Lagoon, Meadow Creek, Arroyo Grande Creek Estuary and the Pacific Ocean.

“The cause of the spill wasn’t wholly weather related,” said Julie Macedo, senior staff counsel in the State Water Resources Control Board’s Office of Enforcement. “There was inadequate preparation and response by the District, in addition to reporting issues.”

The overflow occurred when flood water entered the Sanitation District’s pump station in Oceano, causing a control switch to short out. An investigation into the overflow conducted by the State Water Board’s enforcement team concluded that the incident was preventable. Sanitation District officials knew of the potential risks of the unprotected equipment and electrical wiring, according to the investigation.

The State Water Resources Control Board (State Water Board) conducted lengthy negotiations to reach a settlement with the Sanitation District, but ultimately reached an impasse. The sides were far apart on the volume of the spill and the fine to be paid.

“We asked for extensive information from the District, and we were not persuaded by the information or conclusions reached by its engineers, nor by its suggested penalties,” Macedo said.

The State Water Board’s investigation concluded that the volume of the spill was 1,139,825 gallons, and the suggested fine \$1,383,007.50.

“The Water Board's enforcement team is proposing a reasonable penalty in this case based on the evidence, the law, and previous cases,” said Michael Thomas, Assistant Executive Officer for the Regional Water Board.

“A preventable sewage spill of more than a million gallons is a serious issue, and one of the main purposes of enforcement is to deter future violations,” Thomas said. “Unfortunately, we were unable to reach a negotiated settlement with the Sanitation District because, based on the facts and our experience, the District’s spill amount calculations weren't reasonable. So we scheduled this matter for a public hearing, where the Water Board itself will decide the outcome.”

No date has been set for the hearing, but it will likely be scheduled for September.

The State Water Resources Control Board’s mission is to preserve, enhance and restore California’s water resources and ensure their proper allocation and efficient use for the benefit of present and future generations. The Central Coast Water Board’s vision is to have healthy watersheds. To learn more, please visit: <http://www.waterboards.ca.gov/centralcoast/>

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