



California Environmental Protection Agency

NEWS RELEASE

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California's Waters May Be Threatened By Year 2000 Microchip Problem

Sacramento - In an effort to head off major problems that could affect California's waters in the year 2000, the State Water Resources Control Board (SWRCB) strongly urges wastewater dischargers and others in the industry to check their electronic devices and computer systems. At the heart of the problem are embedded microchips that are not compliant with the date change from December 31, 1999 to January 1, 2000 -- in short, the Year 2000 (Y2K) "bug."

Some of the devices in question include timers, valves, monitoring equipment, meters and switches in many settings, including devices that treat wastewater. If the chip is "non-compliant" it may cause the device it controls to quit working or work improperly on the first day in the year 2000. A wide variety of toxic discharges to the state's waters could result from valves or other equipment failures.

Based on observations and the experiences of experts in the field, the embedded microchip problem is considered a more serious threat to the public's health and safety than the computer programs that may fail to operate correctly after January 1, 2000.

“Clean water is essential to our survival. Those responsible for wastewater treatment should do their best to identify and correct non-compliant programs and microchip processors,” said Walt Pettit, Executive Director of the SWRCB.

On October 28 the SWRCB sent a questionnaire to all waste dischargers requesting information on the status of Y2K remediation efforts and contingency plans in case critical systems fail or suppliers are unable to provide critical services or products. Based on the number and completeness of the responses, the SWRCB will determine if further action is required. The questionnaire, due back November 20, will also become part of the official record in the event that penalties are eventually assessed for violations.

To provide information to wastewater dischargers, the SWRCB offers its website as a clearinghouse for information on the Y2K problem as it affects water quality. The site offers a much needed venue where water dischargers can post their experiences with embedded chip problems and share this information with others in the industry. There are also links and information from other Internet sites that will assist industry persons in their efforts to address their non-compliant devices. The web page can be found at <http://www.swrcb.ca.gov/y2k/y2k.html>.