
WEDNESDAY, February 8, 2006

Board Must Reduce Runoff

OPINION

Urban runoff is the No. 1 source of coastal water pollution, harming Central California's marine ecosystem and endangering its coastal economy. Unless the Regional Water Quality Control Board commits to a strong, effective plan for reducing runoff, the health and natural beauty of Monterey Bay will be jeopardized.

Urban runoff is what happens when pollutants from businesses, development, and industry are carried through the storm drain system into the ocean. This nasty liquid is a toxic brew of everything from automotive fluids to animal feces and chemicals from our streets, parking lots and businesses. Because our cities are covered in pavement, runoff, with its toxins and bacterial pathogens, is not absorbed into the ground. Rather it makes its way untreated through the storm drains into the ocean, endangering marine life and the health of those using the waters.

It does not have to be this way.

Communities across the country have found sensible ways to combat this leading source of water pollution. We don't need to spend a fortune to do it either. Because Monterey and the Central Coast are growing, there's an opportunity to do things the smart way and plan ahead so that additional develop-

ment is designed to contain runoff before it reaches the bay.

At the Regional Water Quality Control Board's suggestion, the Natural Resources Defense Council worked with the Ocean Conservancy to help achieve this goal. We examined the initial proposal and compared it to what has worked well in other communities across the nation. In October, we submitted an 80-page report suggesting a host of steps to curb urban runoff.

Unfortunately, despite claims from municipalities that all of NRDC and the Ocean Conservancy's suggested standards had been accepted, the draft regional plan only incorporated a small fraction of the report's recommendations. Monterey's Regional Storm Water Management Plan, as written, violates state and federal law by failing to adequately address urban runoff.

The regional water board must be clear about what constitutes a successful plan for dealing with runoff: firm commitments and measurable standards for reducing pollution, less discretion for municipalities to delay or selectively implement runoff control measures, and the adoption of design standards. Standards for construction and redevelopment must use best management practices, such as rigorous inspections, catch basins and sand filters to stop pollution at its source.

At Thursday's public hearing meeting in Salinas, 1 p.m. at City Hall, the board should exercise strong leadership to ensure the Central Coast's economic and environmental health. The board and local municipalities must revise the inadequate plan, or Monterey Bay's marine life and the health of those that enjoy the bay will continue to be at risk.

By acting now to reduce polluted urban runoff, we can enhance our quality of life, safeguard it in the future, and protect the beautiful ocean waters that have defined the Central Coast -- and its economy -- for generations.

Anjali Jaiswal is a staff attorney for the National Resources Defense Council.

The Central Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board will hold a public hearing on a storm water management program for jurisdictions along the Monterey Bay at 1 p.m. Thursday at the Salinas City Council chamber rotunda, 200 Lincoln Ave., Salinas. A revised plan is available at http://www.waterboards.ca.gov/stor/wqtr/docs/monterey_swmp. Questions about the hearing should be directed to Ryan Lodge at (805) 549-3506.