



Media Release

City of San Diego will pay \$4.6 million for 2020 sewage spill into Sweetwater River

San Diego Water Board also requires repairs, upgrades to system

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SAN DIEGO – The City of San Diego agreed to pay \$4.6 million and make necessary repairs and improvements to its sanitary sewer system that failed during intense storms on April 10-11, 2020, discharging more than 11 million gallons of untreated wastewater into the Sweetwater River and threatening environmental harm to residents of a nearby disadvantaged community, fish and wildlife.

The San Diego Regional Water Quality Control Board adopted a stipulated cease-and-desist order with a set schedule for the needed repairs. It also approved the substantial penalty for water quality violations that occurred due to a blockage in the underground siphon that transports wastewater underneath the river to the sewer system's second largest pump station. Pump failure and aging equipment at the station were also major contributing factors.

The sewage spill occurred approximately one-quarter of a mile upstream of Pepper Park, a widely used recreational site with a playground and fishing dock, and a similar distance from the San Diego Bay National Wildlife Refuge that is home to endangered and migratory birds.

As part of the agreement, the city will direct approximately \$3.7 million of the penalty to two environmental projects that benefit disadvantaged communities in close proximity to the spill. One of the projects (Living Shorelines) is for restoration and the other (Ocean Connectors) involves restoration, education and community outreach.

"These two enforcement actions, when taken together, further the San Diego Water Board's [Practical Vision](#) and the objectives of aggressively addressing water quality violations that pose a threat to human health, wildlife and the environment," said Executive Officer Dave Gibson. "In this instance, proper maintenance of the sewer system and its associated alarm system could have prevented or minimized the impacts of the spill. The amount of the penalty therefore reflects the need to hold the city accountable, while the requirement to repair and upgrade the system underscores the need to make vital infrastructure resilient to the major storms that are projected to happen more frequently due to climate change."



CALIFORNIA ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY

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Besides upgrading infrastructure at the pump station, the city must improve its response to sewage spills with assessments of impacts to biological and environmental receptors.

The \$3.7 million portion of the fine – which the regional board calculated in accordance with its enforcement policy and penalty methodology - will be suspended upon completion of the two environmental projects.

The San Diego region stretches 85 miles along scenic coastline from Laguna Beach to the Mexican border and extends 50 miles inland to the crest of the coastal mountain range. With its mild climate, residents and tourists alike enjoy numerous water-related activities. However, little precipitation falls within the region. Approximately 90 percent of its water supply is imported from Northern California and the Colorado River.