



# Media Release

## **Central Coast Water Board Fines South San Luis Obispo County Sanitation District for Waste Water Spill**

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The Central Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board (Regional Water Board) voted Wednesday (Oct. 3) to levy a \$1,109,812.80 fine against the South San Luis Obispo County Sanitation District.

The fine stems from a sewer system spill during a storm on Dec. 19 and 20, 2010 at the district's Oceano Waste Water Treatment Plant. Floodwaters flowed into the plant's headworks causing an electrical failure that shut down all four of the plant's influent wastewater pumps. Additional malfunctions caused wastewater to back up into the collection system and spill from manholes, back up into homes in Oceano, and to spill into the Oceano Lagoon, Meadow Creek, Arroyo Grande Creek Estuary, and the Pacific Ocean.

The State Water Resources Control Board (State Water Board) Office of Enforcement filed an Administrative Civil Liability Complaint against the sanitation district, alleging that the spill was caused by inadequate preparation and response by the district.

"The board's primary responsibility is to protect water quality, and the board issues permits to operators of wastewater treatment plants with the expectation that they will meet their obligations to design, operate and monitor their plants to ensure protection of water quality," said Regional Water Board Chairman Jeffrey Young.

The board looked at four different estimates of the amount of water spilled, and found the estimate of the sanitation district's hired consultant, at 674,400 gallons, to be the most credible.

"The board felt the district bore a high degree of culpability for this spill, especially the district's contract operator," Young said. "The board felt that this spill was completely preventable." The Regional Water Board heard 16 hours of testimony and deliberated for 5 hours before reaching its decision.

The overflow occurred when floodwater entered the pump station, 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





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knew of the potential risks of the unprotected equipment and electrical wiring, according to the investigation.

The 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.

The State Water Board's investigation concluded that the volume of the spill was 1,139,825 gallons, and suggested a fine of \$1,383,007.50. The sanitation district contended that the spill was much smaller, that the spill was an unavoidable result of a heavy storm, and that the fine should be reduced.

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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