

Posted on  
Sat, Mar.  
10, 2007

### **Localities fight state pollution proposal**

**Cities, counties say financial cost too great for storm-water plan**

**By Denis Cuff**

**CONTRA COSTA TIMES**

Bay Area cities and counties are attacking a state storm-water-pollution plan that they say would require them to spend millions of dollars to overhaul drains and buy more-effective street sweepers, among other measures.

Environmentalists call the plan a milestone in protecting San Francisco Bay from pollution.

A coalition including Contra Costa, Alameda, Santa Clara and San Mateo counties and 76 cities says the plan lacks proven environmental benefits and could swamp budgets.

The local governments would be forced to rebuild tens of thousands of storm-drain inlets to capture trash to keep it out of creeks, the coalition says. Concord would have to pay an estimated \$9 million to remodel its 6,000 storm drains.

Replacing half the region's street-sweeping trucks would hit cities and counties with another multimillion-dollar burden, officials said.

"We all want clean water, but this is overkill. Cities and counties simply cannot afford this huge extra cost," said Don Freitas, chairman of the Bay Area Stormwater Agencies Association, the coalition of cities and counties.

Many local governments levy fees of \$20 to \$40 per house to pay for local storm-water pollution programs. Raising those fees is impractical, Freitas said, because an increase would require a two-thirds approval of voters.

The cities and counties are rallying against the Oakland-based San Francisco Regional Water Quality Control Board plan for uniform regulation of runoff in the four counties and 76 cities.

Regarded as a huge, diffuse and difficult-to-control pollution source, rainwater and other runoff flowing from streets and other paved surfaces pick up loads of oil, grease, chemicals and pesticides.

When washed into storm drains, the impurities wash into creeks, rivers and bays,

contaminating the food chain for fish, birds and wildlife.

Regional water board administrators say the federal Clean Water Act compels them to push cities and counties to control the pollution.

"The requirements (for cities) have been somewhat vague in the past. Some cities are lagging," said Wil Bruhns, a water board spokesman. "We wanted to put more details and provide more clarity in a single permit that would apply to all the jurisdictions, instead of having different permits for each one."

Bruhns said the 120-page draft plan, released in October, is a focal point for discussions and negotiations, not an unchangeable decree.

The state agency doesn't intend to make cities and counties rebuild all their storm-drain inlets, Bruhns said.

Freitas, however, said state pollution regulators have yet to change the written plan despite many meetings with city and county representatives.

"We keep hearing they are going to change the plan, but there's nothing in writing," Freitas said. "We are horribly frustrated."

City and county leaders on Wednesday plan to ask for relief at a meeting of the regional water board, the panel of gubernatorial appointees that must approve or reject the plan.

Street sweeping figures to be a hot topic Wednesday, as it has been before.

Dublin and Berkeley public works administrators said it would be expensive and arbitrary to require replacement of half of all street-sweeping trucks within five years. The vehicles cost about \$160,000 to \$180,000 each.

"That doesn't take into consideration the condition of the trucks," said Mark Lander, Dublin's city engineer. "You could have one city with all new equipment and another with broken-down trucks barely operating."

Lander said that instead of requiring all storm-drain inlets to be fitted with trash filters or collectors, it makes sense to put filters at trash hot spots and key storm-water lines.

City and county leaders complain that the state board wants to require them to regularly inspect industries and businesses for storm-water pollution sources, but not help pay for the task.

Developers also criticized the plan. They object to a proposal to make smaller developments meet new requirements to filter runoff through grass and plants to

remove impurities.

Building projects covering 10,000 square feet or more now must be designed to meet the filtering rule. The plan would drop the minimum to 5,000 square feet

The Northern California Homebuilders Association contends that it is wrong to apply the rule to smaller developments when there has been little time to see how the filter requirements work on larger projects.

One environmental group leader said cities and counties exaggerate the burden of cleaning up storm water.

"There are many low-tech solutions that can be used," said Deb Self, executive director of Baykeeper, based in San Francisco. "This is a big opportunity for government to take responsibility for the health of our creeks and bays."

Reach Denis Cuff at 925-943-8267 or [dcuff@cctimes.com](mailto:dcuff@cctimes.com).