

# WATERKEEPERS NORTHERN CALIFORNIA

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February 9, 2001

Loretta Barsamian  
Executive Officer  
San Francisco Regional Water Quality Control Board  
1515 Clay Street, Ste. 1400  
Oakland, California 94612

RE: Request for Assessment and Clean-Up at Pacheco Pond

Dear Ms. Barsamian,

We are writing to alert you to an ostensibly serious water quality problem in the Pacheco Pond Wildlife Area in Novato and to request that your agency take immediate action to characterize the problem and restore water quality. Neighborhood and environmental groups' concerns over the water quality problems and health of Pacheco Pond remain high as an investigation by WaterKeepers Northern California and Friends of Novato Creek continues. We hope the Board can provide immediate and comprehensive water and sediment testing in the Pond to determine the possible cause of colored plumes of unknown substances, chemical, sewage, and sulfur odors, and repeated fish kills.

### Serious water quality problems documented

A series of well documented events have occurred recently in Pacheco Pond which bear directly on water quality and environmental health for wildlife and humans:

☒ Friends of Novato Creek Director, Sue Lattanzio reports that on May 30<sup>th</sup>, 2000, Memorial Day weekend, there was a mass fish die off of over two hundred striped bass in Pacheco Pond, adjacent Novato Creek and Bel Marin Keys.

☒ Subsequently, a series of "sulfur" odor problems and smaller fish kills were reported in mid-October through the first week of November. Novato Fire District documentation of "sulfur odor" complaint logs show that the offensive odor complaints covered a

widespread area and indicate the Pond is the likely origin.

■ The City of Novato took a water sample after complaints of a "milky, white plume" were reported on October 26, 2000. Total coliform and a "bench" test of the white substance were conducted - no other testing procedures were ordered on the samples. Results from the tests turned out inconclusive and were not quantitative, according to lab reports.

■ Area resident Edward Mainland reports: " Captain Mark Landman of Novato Fire District told me of the wide range of locations reporting the sulfur odor - from south of Hamilton to west of Highway 101 in Ignacio. It was a major, widespread event, noted by hundreds of residents".

■ Also during this time and into December and January, weekly and sometimes daily fish kills in Pacheco Pond were noted by office workers, neighbors and passers by. Chemical, sewage, and sulfur odors are intermittent and pervasive.

■ On November 8<sup>th</sup>, 2000 the Marin County Sheriff's Dive Team became ill after entering Pacheco Pond. Sheriff's Detective Rick Navarro reports that the divers felt a "burning sensation" on their exposed skin, and immediately got out of the Pond. One diver unfortunately swallowed a mouthful of pond water when his mouthpiece fell out and became nauseous. An emergency call was placed. Novato Fire District engines and firefighters were already in the area searching for the source of the "sulfur" complaints, and were able to decontaminate the Dive Team and their gear quickly. The Dive Team has not gone into the waters of Pacheco Pond since - they now use a boat, and drag with a magnet. The contamination incident was reported to Marin County Environmental Health Department. If there has been any water quality testing in Pacheco Pond subsequent to the November 8<sup>th</sup> incident by any government agency, it has not been made available to the Sheriff, County Environmental Health Services, or to the public.

#### *Existing Monitoring Efforts Have Been Inadequate*

We understand that Jim Ponton of the Regional Water Quality Control Board took a water sample/s on January 31, 2001 at the turn-out location of the pond, by the main box culvert. However, this sample was taken approximately two weeks after the gated box culverts to Novato creek were left open, allowing flushing of the pond waters. Thus the sampled water was not representative of the contaminated, pre-flushed pond water. Once the water level drops in the pond, and the lock is no longer available to wash contaminants into San Pablo Bay, we predict an immediate return to previous water quality problems in Pacheco Pond.

Since the water flow at this sample site has increased, WaterKeepers and Friends of Novato Creek feel that sediment samples, at this point in time, would yield the most information. The source/s of discharge have yet to be identified, and until such a monitoring program and study are undertaken, no remedial or regulatory action can be

implemented.

WaterKeepers and Friends of Novato Creek believe there are the following discharge points into Pacheco Pond: Hamilton Air Force Base, Pacheco Creek, Arroyo de San Jose, Bel Marin Keys Industrial Park storm drain system, and depending on whether the box culvert is open or closed, Novato Creek, and Novato Sanitary District outfall. More potential discharge sites could be identified.

These wetland areas serve as critical habitat and have the potential to support State and Federally Endangered species. As noted above, human contact with Pacheco Pond does occur, therefore public health concerns are also at issue. There seems to be a serious question of discharges into local waters, possible migration of contaminants in sub-surface drainages, underlying water table, creeks, and wetlands which must be addressed immediately through a comprehensive testing program including surface water and sediments samples.

Please contact either Elena Belsky or Susan Lattanzio, using the contact information provided below, with questions or comments. Your consideration of this issue is appreciated and we await your response.

Sincerely,

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CC:

Tony Landis, Chief of NoCal Operations, Office of Military Facilities, DTSC.  
Felicia Marcus, Administrator, U.S. EPA Region 9  
Bill Cox, Region Fisheries Director, Department of Fish and Game  
Rick Wantuck, NOAA/NMFS

Anne Badgley, Region 1 - Director, US Fish & Wildlife Service  
Will Travis, Bay Conservation and Development Commission  
Jim Ponton, SF Bay RWQCB  
Lance McMahan, State Dept of Toxic Substances Control  
Theresa McGarry, State Dept of Toxic Substances Control  
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Jim McAllister, US Army Corps of Eng.  
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Dominic Zigant, City of Novato  
Robert Turner, Marin County EHS  
Robert Doyle, Marin County Sheriff

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