

Frequently Asked Questions Regarding Water Quality Issues in the Los Osos Community

Spring 2002 (Edition 1 of 4)

Central Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board



Who is the Regional Board and what is its mandate?

The Regional Water Quality Control Board is a State Agency composed of nine Governor appointed members with a mission to preserve, enhance and restore the quality of California's water resources for the benefit of present and future generations. There are nine Regional Boards statewide, plus the State Board (parent agency) in Sacramento. The Central Coast Region reaches from Santa Clara County to northern Ventura County and inland to the ridgeline of the coastal range.

The Regional Boards regulate discharges of waste in order to prevent degradation of water quality. For example, the Regional Board regulates industries including: wineries, dairies, quarries, power plants, as well as community wastewater systems, chemical spills, and cleanup sites such as the Unocal Guadalupe and Avila Beach sites. Also, staff at the Regional Board are involved in a variety of public education, assistance and regulatory programs to promote land use practices which will result in water quality protective agricultural use practices, erosion control, stormwater management, promoting conservation easements, etc.

Does Los Osos have a water quality problem?

Yes, the Los Osos Community does have a variety of water quality problems. Located on the southern edge of Morro Bay State and National Estuary, the community of Baywood Park/Los Osos has a population of approximately 15,000 people or about 5,000 individual lots served by septic systems. Many of the lots are too small for standard leachfield disposal (some lots are only 25 or 37.5 feet wide), therefore pits are used for waste disposal. In the most acutely problematic areas, disposal pits extend into shallow ground water

leaving no soil column for further treatment of waste.

Inadequate treatment and disposal of wastewater in Los Osos impacts beneficial uses of surface and ground water in a number of ways. Ground water (drinking water supply) has been so degraded by nitrates that many areas no longer meet State drinking water standards and use of the shallow portions of the aquifer is now limited primarily to non-domestic (irrigation) supply. Because shallow ground water is so degraded, domestic supply is pumped primarily from the deeper portions of the aquifer. Pumping from the deeper zone increases the potential for seawater intrusion into the deeper zone.

Surfacing ground water, especially during the wet season, creates a public health threat by forcing wastewater to the ground surface. Surfacing water (ground water mixed with wastewater) flows and/or is pumped into roadside ditches and storm drains, which then flow into Morro Bay. In less adequately drained areas, surfacing wastewater remains ponded until it can soak back into the soil. This situation is hazardous to children who are tempted to play in these puddles. Increased bacteria in Morro Bay have contaminated shellfish and resulted in shellfish growing areas being downgraded by the State Department of Health Services. Furthermore, DNA testing of bacteria laden seepage into Morro Bay from the Los Osos shoreline (ground water seeps) has confirmed the largest source of bacteria is from humans. Continued use of septic systems in the community will only increase these problems.

Why can't Los Osos residents continue using their septic systems?

Los Osos is unique in many respects, but mainly because of its location adjacent to a beautiful, but environmentally sensitive, area such as the Morro Bay State and National

Estuary. Unfortunately, the community developed without long-range planning or infrastructure designed to protect its sole source of drinking water (ground water) or the Morro Bay Estuary.

Extreme density of septic system use is the greatest (and most controllable) source of ground water degradation in Los Osos. As a general guideline, septic systems are normally limited to one residential system per acre. In many areas of Los Osos the density is more than ten times that limit.

Why do we need a wastewater project?

As far as we know, water quality problems in Los Osos have been the most studied issue in the history of this Regional Board. Issues ranging from quantity and quality of ground water supplies, sources of contamination, and possible corrective actions have been studied since 1969 by federal, state and local governmental agencies, private consultants and community groups, including:

- State Department of Water Resources
- State Water Resources Control Board
- U. S. Environmental Protection Agency
- U. S. Geological Survey
- San Luis Obispo County
- Los Osos Community Services District
- National Estuary Program
- Citizen's groups (Blue Ribbon Committee, Technical Advisory Committee, and others)

Various nationally renowned consultants including Brown & Caldwell, Engineering Science, Metcalf & Eddy, Montgomery Watson, Fugro West, The Morro Group, and Questa Engineering have evaluated, studied and reported on this issue. There have also been several citizens' groups: (Technical Advisory Committee, Blue Ribbon Committee, Solution's Group, and others) which have also met, researched, evaluated, discussed and issued reports on the subject. These studies identify significant water quality problems and

conclude a wastewater project is needed to resolve those problems.

Summary

Our hope and intent with this series of flyers is to provide some basic facts and scientific information to address questions that have repeatedly come up regarding this subject. We believe the community, through its locally elected Los Osos Community Services District, has been working hard to develop a technically sound and viable wastewater project. The District's project was developed after lengthy and comprehensive evaluation of wastewater technologies and alternatives. The project was subject to a thorough public process, including the preparation and certification of an Environmental Impact Report. In addition, the level of support for this project was evident by the approval of the 2001 assessment district by an overwhelming majority of the voting Los Osos' property owners.

Cost of the project is a concern for everyone, and delays will contribute to even greater expense. Community members interested in helping secure additional public funding for the project can write their legislative representatives (State Assembly and Senate and U. S. Congress and House of Representatives) requesting such financial support. As always, staff is available to meet or discuss any and all further questions Los Osos community members may have regarding these issues. Contact information is listed below.

For More Information

If you have question, please contact:

Sorrel Marks, Project Manager at 549-3695 or Gerhardt Hubner, Coastal Watershed Supervisor at 542-4647



About the Central Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board: Located in San Luis Obispo, we're part of the California Environmental Protection Agency (Cal/EPA). Our mission is to preserve, enhance, and restore the quality of the Central Coast Region's water resources for the benefit of present and future generations. You may contact us by telephone at (805)-549-3147. Visit us on the web at: www.swrcb.ca.gov/rwqcb3/WMI/Index.htm