

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

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Central Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board



## Why was Cabrillo Estates excluded from the Discharge Prohibition Zone?

The Cabrillo Estates tract (southwest edge of community) was not included in the prohibition area because hydrogeologic information at that time indicated ground water from that area flows westerly and therefore does not contribute to the water quality impairment of the greater basin. The Cabrillo Estates area also has the benefit of significant separation to ground water, and greater area for septic tank effluent, not available in most of the prohibition zone. Claims by project opponents that Cabrillo Estates was excluded because a Regional Board member lived there are simply false. Resolution No. 83-13 was adopted in 1983, at which time no Regional Board members lived in the Cabrillo Estates area of Los Osos. Former Regional Board member George Rathmell lived in Cabrillo Estates, but was not appointed to the Regional Board until 1988 ( five years after the discharge prohibition area was adopted).

## Why hasn't the Regional Board implemented interim measures, such as a septic tank maintenance program?

A septic tank maintenance program, (solids removal from septic tanks), would do little to improve water quality. Septic tanks typically retain solids, which are periodically pumped and hauled to a disposal site. The liquid portion of the wastewater is the portion discharged to (and impairing) ground water in Los Osos. On the other hand, dramatically increasing tank pumping to prevent discharge into the leachfields (and ground water) could improve water quality. However, this would entail using the septic tank as a holding tank and pumping it every few days. The type of septic system failure in Los Osos is not particularly amenable to improvement through implementation of a septic tank maintenance program. In Los Osos, the septic system failure cannot be "repaired" simply by pumping (maintaining) the tanks, since the tanks are

operating as designed (they are retaining solids). It is the liquid portion of the sewage discharged through leachfields, which is degrading water quality in Los Osos.

## Will TOC (Total Organic Carbon) and chlorination byproducts in effluent impact ground water?

Total Organic Carbon in tertiary treatment plant effluent is likely to have significantly less impact upon ground water than that from existing septic system discharges. Also, it should be noted that the Los Osos CSD project includes disinfection using ultra-violet light for disinfection rather than chlorine, therefore chlorine byproducts will be an insignificant component of the effluent.

## What will happen to septage produced during decommissioning of septic tanks?

Septage disposal (during tank decommissioning) will require pumping and hauling the tank contents to an appropriate off-site disposal location. This activity will be one of many cumbersome aspects of retrofitting an existing community with a sewer system. The project will proceed at the pace allowed by proper implementation of this activity, and a great many other construction related tasks.

## How will sewage spills into Morro Bay be handled?

Los Osos CSD has developed a Spill Prevention and Response Plan as part of its compliance with requirements issued by the Regional Board (Order No. R3-2004-0007). Currently, inadequately treated waste discharges to the Morro Bay daily/constantly through seeping ground water and surfacing waste. The community wastewater project will significantly improve the collection and adequate treatment of waste, as well as the ability to respond to spills (if they occur).

## Is Los Osos experiencing salt water intrusion into ground water?

Ground water data has for years indicated potential concern regarding salt water intrusion into the lower ground water zone. A recent study commissioned by Los Osos CSD estimated that the toe of the salt water wedge underneath the western portion of Los Osos is moving easterly (inland) at a rate of approximately 100 feet per year. This problem is caused by overuse of the lower ground water zone. The community wastewater project will protect and restore the upper ground water zone, ultimately returning it to potable municipal supply, reducing pumping of the lower zone and helping to solve the intrusion problem.

## Why not delay the Project so more technical studies can be completed?

The project must proceed as quickly as possible to stop the on-going harm from constant illegal discharges to waters of the community and waters of the state. Over the past three decades, Los Osos has become one of the most studied water quality problems in the state. The Los Osos CSD has utilized this huge body of information to develop a technically, environmentally and economically sound community based project. However, this does not mean that technical studies have ceased. The project includes ongoing monitoring to assure compliance with water quality criteria, mitigation measures and permit conditions. Information gained from these ongoing studies can be used to evaluate, modify and plan future waste and water management decisions and actions.

## What is the source of data used in nitrate concentrations graphs used in Regional Board presentations?

The sources of information depicted in the nitrate concentration graphs include the 1995 report *Assessment of Nitrate Contamination in Ground Water Basins* (San Luis Obispo County and Water Purveyor well data) and data provided by the Los Osos CSD's ongoing ground water monitoring program.

## What about joining with the City of Morro Bay for regional sewerage?

Over the past three decades, many approaches, collection and treatment methods, reuse and disposal alternatives have been explored. Key considerations have always included minimizing cost, minimizing environmental impacts and maintaining a sustainable water supply. These vital factors, plus multi-jurisdictional issues and timely implementation contribute to the preference of a localized wastewater project. For example, the solution to sea water intrusion, discussed in the preceding paragraph, would not be possible with water exported to Morro Bay.

## Summary

We hope these information flyers will contribute to improved community-wide understanding of the need for the wastewater project and related water quality issues. A better understanding of the facts will minimize project delays that result in project cost increases and ongoing environmental degradation.

## For More Information

If you have questions, please contact:

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**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 can contact us by telephone at (805)-549-3147. Visit us on the web at: [www.swrcb.ca.gov/rwqcb3/WMI/Index.html](http://www.swrcb.ca.gov/rwqcb3/WMI/Index.html)