

**REGIONAL WATER QUALITY CONTROL BOARD
SAN DIEGO REGION**

**EXECUTIVE OFFICER SUMMARY REPORT
SEPTEMBER 14, 2022**

ITEM 5

SUBJECT

Informational Item: Update on the Santa Margarita River Water Quality Restoration Plan for Nutrients (Lark Starkey)

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Informational item only; no recommendation.

KEY ISSUES

Staff are developing the Santa Margarita River Water Quality Restoration Plan for Nutrients (River Restoration Plan) as an alternative to a traditional TMDL for water quality impairments caused by eutrophication. The River Restoration Plan relies on implementing existing permits, policies, and plans and tracking their effectiveness toward achieving nutrient load reductions, numeric targets, and beneficial uses through water body-oriented monitoring. This approach is more adaptable than a TMDL because it does not require a Basin Plan amendment to incorporate new science, analysis, management measures, or other changes.

The River Restoration Plan is being developed with input from the Santa Margarita River Watershed Nutrient Initiative Group, a stakeholder group composed of several public agencies and representatives of agricultural, tribal, and other interests (Stakeholder Group; Supporting Document No. 1). The San Diego Water Board and the Stakeholder Group funded scientific support and analysis provided by the Southern California Coastal Water Research Project, Tetra Tech, and through special studies.

PRACTICAL VISION

Chapter 1 of the Practical Vision, Strategizing for Healthy Waters, is focused on achieving healthy waters in the San Diego Region through the Key Beneficial Use and Key Areas Approach. The River Restoration Plan will provide a restoration strategy to attain the key beneficial uses for habitats and ecosystems in stream systems, habitats identified in the Practical Vision as high priority habitats. The River Restoration Plan aims to protect the most sensitive beneficial uses of warm freshwater habitat (WARM), cold freshwater habitat (COLD), and rare, threatened, or endangered species (RARE) in the River to advance the Practical Vision. In addition, the River Restoration Plan includes a climate change analysis, advancing the goal of Chapter 7: Mitigate Climate Change Impacts. The River Restoration Plan uses the climate change analysis to improve the resiliency of the River's water quality and the River Restoration Plan to climate change.

DISCUSSION

This is an opportunity for the San Diego Water Board and members of the public to learn about the development of the River Restoration Plan. Discussion during this item is limited to the matters presented in the informational item, no action will be taken.

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Consistent with the State Water Board's [Impaired Waters Policy](#) and guidance from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, staff are developing a Water Quality Restoration Plan to address impairments of habitat and recreational beneficial uses caused by nutrients and eutrophication in the Santa Margarita River (River). The River's watershed (Watershed) is the largest of the San Diego region's eleven watersheds covering approximately 750 square miles and encompassing portions of both Riverside County and San Diego County (Supporting Document 2). Approximately 73.5 percent of the Watershed land surface falls within Riverside County, which includes all or portions of the Cities of Murrieta, Temecula, and Wildomar. The remaining 26.5 percent of the Watershed is in San Diego County and includes part of Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton and the unincorporated communities of Fallbrook and Rainbow.

The Board added the Santa Margarita River to the Clean Water Act (CWA) section 303(d) Impaired Waters list for nutrients (nitrogen and phosphorus) in 2012. The impairments have been confirmed in each subsequent 303d list. Excessive nutrient loading to the River and its tributaries causes and/or contributes to exceedances of Water Quality Objectives and adversely impacts beneficial uses designated to the Santa Margarita River. Excessive discharge of nutrients also has the potential to adversely impact water quality in the large groundwater basins in the Santa Margarita watershed designated for Municipal and Domestic Supply (MUN). Major sources of nutrients in the Watershed include agricultural land uses and Municipal Separate Storm Sewer Systems (MS4s) in San Diego and Riverside counties.

The River Restoration Plan will be considered an alternative to a traditional Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) and retains more flexibility and efficiency than the traditional TMDL approach. It is an available option under State policy and federal guidance in this case because staff found that existing effluent limits in waste discharge requirements should be sufficient to protect the beneficial uses. If, however, the River Restoration Plan does not result in timely and measurable reductions of nutrients and sustained achievement of numeric targets and beneficial uses, a "traditional" TMDL can be adopted into the Basin Plan. However, if the Restoration Plan leads to meeting water quality standards, then the water body may be removed from the CWA section 303(d) list.

Development of the River Restoration Plan and Next Steps

The Draft Staff Report for the River Restoration Plan will include all the elements of a traditional TMDL such as numeric targets, a source analysis, implementation plan, and a monitoring and assessment plan. In addition, it includes a climate change analysis to help ensure that the Plan would be successful as temperature and hydrology change over the next decades.

Therefore, the results of this TMDL process can be used by the San Diego Water Board to adopt a formal TMDL, or, consistent with the Impaired Waters Policy, to justify a decision not to adopt a traditional rule-making TMDL and instead continue with the River Restoration Plan. After the River Restoration Plan is completed and brought before the

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Board for its consideration, staff will likely prepare an Investigative Order or amended monitoring plans for permittees to track effectiveness of the River Restoration Plan's implementation.

LEGAL CONCERNS

None

PUBLIC NOTICE

The Meeting Notice and Agenda for today's meeting was posted on the Board's website. It was also sent to those who subscribed to the Board Meetings email list on August 25, 2022, and those who subscribe to the Santa Margarita Watershed email list on August 29, 2022. This item was publicly noticed in the Meeting Notice and Agenda for the September 14, 2022 meeting.

SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS

1. Map of Santa Margarita River Watershed
2. Santa Margarita River Nutrient Initiative Stakeholder Group Participants