Rancho Water

May 11, 2011

Via email: commentletters@waterboards.ca.gov

Jeanine Townsend
Clerk to the Board
State Water Resources Control Board
1001 I Street, Sacramento, CA 95814

SUBJECT: Comment Letter – SSS WDRs Review & Update

Dear Ms. Townsend:

The Rancho California Water District (RCWD) appreciates the opportunity to comment on the State Water Quality Control Board's proposed revisions to the Sanitary Sewer System Waste Discharge Requirements (SSS WDRs). By way of background, RCWD is a retail water and sewer agency encompassing approximately 150 square miles in southwestern Riverside County, serving water to approximately 43,000 service connections in the City of Temecula, portions of the City of Murrieta as well as surrounding unincorporated areas of Riverside County. The agency provides sewage collection and treatment services to approximately 17,600 service connections in a portion of its northern water service area and portions of two neighboring water districts on a contract basis. RCWD's sewage collection system consists of approximately 80 miles of pipeline and three lift stations. RCWD owns and operates the Santa Rosa Water Reclamation Facility in Murrieta, permitted for 5 mgd of Title 22 tertiary treatment capacity. RCWD beneficially reuses 100% of the plant's effluent for landscape irrigation within its service area.

RCWD has found the implementation of existing SSS WDRs to date to be a very positive step in decreasing the likelihood of sanitary sewer overflows. Of particular benefit has been the implementation of systematic facilities evaluations for planning of system repairs and future capital improvements. The proposed revisions to the SSS WDRs represent a major departure from the program that has been successfully implemented under the existing SSS WDRs. While we appreciate the State Water Board's efforts to address certain issues associated with the existing WDRs, our agency is very concerned about a number of the proposed revisions, especially those related to reporting of private lateral sewage discharges (PLSDs), and onerous additions to sewer system management plan (SSMP) requirements that should not be mandated unless State Water Board guidance and funding is made available. As requirements become more complicated and confusing, more agency staff time is directed towards preparing reports and re-organizing information and operating procedures, and less time is spent actually managing or conducting the appropriate operations and maintenance (O&M) activities to prevent SSOs and properly maintain the collection system.

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Following are RCWD's specific comments:

1. **Sanitary sewer system regulations should not be adopted under a two-tiered WDRs and NPDES permit.**

We strongly oppose the two-tiered WDRs and NPDES permit alternative, whereby an SSO occurring previously or in the future would trigger the requirement to apply for an NPDES permit, and agree with several points included in the Staff Report also opposing an NPDES permit. Since the existing SSS WDRs and the proposed revisions to the SSS WDRs do not authorize sanitary-sewer overflows (SSOs) to waters of the United States, there is no need for an NPDES permit. The result of triggering an NPDES permit would subject local public agencies to additional and more egregious non-governmental organization (NGO) lawsuits and higher administrative penalties with absolutely no demonstration that this would improve water quality or further reduce SSOs.

As described in the Staff Report, this alternative would also require significant additional Water Board staff resources to track and implement the different permit tiers. We understand that these staff resources are limited, and believe that they should instead be used to further improve SSO reduction efforts under the existing SSS WDRs.

2. **The basis for mandatory reporting of Private Lateral Sewage Discharges (PLSDs) is not justified and creates an inappropriate burden for public agency staff.**

The SSS WDR would require enrollees to report spills from privately owned laterals when they become aware of them. Such reporting is currently voluntary. Water Board staff has not provided adequate justification nor has it thoroughly considered the staffing and financial resources necessary to require public agencies to report PLSDs that are not affiliated with the collection system agency. The justification offered for this change is simply that the State Water Board wants to "get a better picture of" the magnitude of PSLDs and better identify collection systems with "systemic issues" with PSLs.

The Staff Report includes a reference to a study that indicated that the total volume of sewage from private laterals is about 5% of the total volume from SSOs, almost all of which never pose a threat to waters. Requiring public agencies to provide detailed information regarding such a small percentage of overflow volumes from parts of the system over which they have no control is not appropriate and would divert limited staff resources from higher priority issues that actually protect waters.
As to the goal of generating better information regarding PSL spills, we do not believe that the burden of requiring enrollees to report information or face being in noncompliance with the SSS WDR bears a reasonable relationship to the need for the information and the benefits to be obtained. Enrollees reporting spills may be liable to the property owner for errors in reporting, and property owners may claim they are entitled to compensation from the local agency for repair or replacement costs stemming from the reported spill. Under the current voluntary reporting scheme, the enrollee can weigh these factors in deciding whether to report PSL spills or not.

Furthermore, if enrollees are required to report spills whether or not they occur within the enrollee's system, multiple entities (city, county, POTW, etc.) could all be required to report a single PSL spill with potentially differing estimates of volume and other information. Rather than enhance the

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Board's knowledge base, this will actually lead to greater confusion and require additional resources to sort out and match up the multiple reports.

We recommend that the State Water Board first work with the California Department of Public Health and local environmental health officers to determine if the desired information can be obtained through mutual agency cooperation. We believe that public health agencies have the best knowledge of overflows from laterals on private property, and are, in most instances, the most appropriate agencies to respond to these events.

3. **It is essential that State and Regional Water Board staff consider the reasons for each SSO in any enforcement action.**

The existing SSS WDRs included language in Provision D.6 that provided some reassurance that, in the case of an SSO enforcement action, the State and/or Regional Water Board would consider why the SSO might have occurred and to what extent it would have been reasonably possible for the Enrollee to prevent it.

Existing language reads: "*In assessing these factors, the State and/or Regional Water Boards **will** also consider whether…*" (emphasis added)

In the proposed revisions to the SSS WDRs, this language was changed to read: "*In assessing these factors, the State and/or Regional Water Boards **may** also consider whether…*" (emphasis added)

The proposed revisions to the SSS WDRs would transform the existing enforcement discretion language, which expresses a clear statement of the State Board's intent regarding enforcement priorities and responses, into a purely advisory provision, which individual regional boards are free to follow or ignore as they choose. The factors described in (a) through (g) of Provision D.6 are highly relevant to the Enrollee's efforts to properly manage, operate and maintain its system and these factors should definitely be considered in enforcement actions.

It is imperative that the existing language be retained. Enrollees should not be made to suffer consequences for conditions that are outside their reasonable control.

4. **Significant additional Sewer System Management Plan (SSMP) requirements should not be mandated until the State Water Board provides guidance and funding.**

The proposed "Risk and Threat Analysis" and "Staff Performance Assessment Program" are vague, not statistically supported, unnecessarily complicated, and overly prescriptive.

The proposed Risk and Threat Analysis of all sanitary sewer assets would be complex and resource-intensive, and would not provide incrementally more benefit than that provided by an otherwise well-operated and managed system. It is not appropriate to require every agency to implement this requirement unless the Water Board can demonstrate that those agencies complying with current requirements have been ineffective in reducing SSOs. This program should also only be required if and when adequate Water Board guidance has been developed and funding is provided.

Requiring development and implementation of the proposed Staff Assessment Program on an agency-by-agency basis is unrealistic. The expectations outlined in the proposed revisions to the

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SSS WDRs suggest that agency staff would be responsible for developing a program similar to the existing Technical Certification Program offered by the California Water Environment Association, which would require a substantial investment of resources to do redundant work at each agency. It is also not appropriate to require public agencies to train contractors (which are separate, private entities).

The Water Board should not implement these new requirements until detailed program guidance is provided. Also, Water Board staff has not demonstrated that the current training requirements are deficient.

5. SSMP sections (i) and (j) should be combined, because otherwise the requirements for routine review and revisions of the SSMP are redundant and contradictory.

SSMP Section (i) *Performance Targets and Program Modifications* and Section (j) *SSMP Program Audits* both require the Enrollee to evaluate the effectiveness of the SSMP and correct or update the document as necessary. Section (i) indicates that this process is to occur on an annual basis, while Section (j) specifies a minimum frequency of once every two years. We recommend that Water Board staff combine these two sections and clarify the requirements.

6. The findings include several incorrect statements about PLSDs.

Finding 7 in the proposed revisions to the SSS WDRs includes the statement: "SSOs and PLSDs may pollute surface or ground waters, threaten beneficial uses and public health, ..." We disagree that PLSDs are in the same category as SSOs from mainline sewers in terms of water quality impacts. These overflows are very small in volume individually, and overall. The words "...and PLSDs..." should be removed.

Finding 9 in the proposed revisions to the SSS WDRs includes the statement: "Major causes of SSOs and PLSDs include but are not limited to: grease blockages, root blockages, debris blockages, sewer line flood damage, manhole structure failures, pipe failures, vandalism, pump station mechanical failures, power outages, excessive storm or ground water inflow/infiltration, sanitary sewer age, construction and related material failures, lack of proper operation and maintenance, insufficient capacity, and contractor-caused damages. Many SSOs and PLSDs can be prevented by having adequate facilities, source control measures, and proper operation and maintenance of the sanitary sewer system." Including PLSDs in these descriptions is incorrect: many of the items on the first list are not causes of PLSDs, and many PLSDs cannot be prevented as described in the second sentence. References to PLSDs should be removed.

7. Requiring de-chlorination of clean-up water is counter-productive.

Prohibition C.3 indicates that potable water would have to be de-chlorinated before it could be used for spill clean-up (in the event water used for clean-up is not fully recovered). Putting restrictions on the use of potable water in cleaning up an SSO that is otherwise likely to violate either of the first two prohibitions simply adds further unnecessary challenges. In addition, the amount of potable water used, combined with the distance it would have to travel to reach a surface water (so the chlorine would readily degrade) does not warrant the additional on-site operational difficulty in dechlorination.

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8. Required reporting of PLSDs by all agencies does not improve the predicament faced by agencies that own lower laterals.

Requirements for reporting of SSOs are applicable to all "discharges resulting from a failure in <u>the Enrollee's</u> sanitary sewer system." (emphasis added) Requirements for reporting of PLSDs apply to all "discharges of wastewater resulting from a failure in a <u>privately owned</u> sewer lateral." (emphasis added) These requirements do not change the fact that SSOs from lower laterals are unfairly attributed only to those agencies that own them. In order to solve the problem, we recommend that the CIWQS database and SSO/mile/yr data reflect *only* mainline spills as a performance measure. Otherwise, comparisons of these data among agencies are incorrect.

In addition, the requirement for Enrollees to report PLSDs as they become aware of should be removed from Provision 4.

9. It is inappropriate to use incomplete information about PLSDs to characterize sanitary sewer system condition and management.

We do not believe that meaningful statistics could be derived from data collected only for those PLSDs that an agency becomes aware of, and we do not support the idea that Water Board staff would decide that collection systems have "systemic issues" based on these incomplete data sets.

The requirement for Enrollees to report PLSDs they become aware of should be removed from Provision 4.

10. Definitions related to private laterals are confusing and contradictory.

The following definitions are confusing and contradictory, as explained in the following paragraphs.

- *Lateral – Segment(s) of pipe that connect(s) a home, building, or satellite sewer system to a sewer main.*

  This definition of a lateral includes both upper and the lower laterals, regardless of whether or not the lower lateral is privately owned.

  Also, the definition of a lateral should not include any reference to satellite sewer systems, as the management and performance of each are very different. Satellite systems should have a separate and distinct definition.

- *Private Lateral – <u>Privately owned</u> sewer piping that is tributary to an Enrollee's sanitary sewer system. The responsibility for maintaining private laterals can be solely that of the Enrollee or private property owner; or it can be shared between the two parties. Sewer use agreements dictate lateral responsibility and the basis for the shared agreement.* (emphasis added)

  This definition does not make reference to upper laterals and lower laterals and is therefore confusing. Also, it is misleading to state that sewer use agreements dictate lateral responsibility, as these agreements seldom exist for individual homeowners.

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- *Private Lateral Sewage Discharge (PLSD) – Wastewater discharges caused by blockages or other problems within laterals are the responsibility of the private lateral owner and not the Enrollee. Discharges from sanitary sewer systems which are tributary to the Enrollee's sanitary sewer system but are not owned by the Enrollee and do not meet the applicability requirements for enrollment under the SSS WDRs are also considered PLSDs.* (emphasis added)

  This definition indicates that PLSDs include overflows from any portion of the lateral, regardless of whether or not the lower laterals are privately owned. The definition of a "private lateral sewage discharge" is inconsistent with that describing a "private lateral", as one includes publically-owned lower laterals while the other does not.

These definitions should be reworked for clarity and accuracy.

11. Revisions to SSMP requirements are premature.

We are concerned that the proposed revisions to the SSS WDRs include *significant* changes to SSMP program requirements. We strongly urge that the existing SSMP requirements be preserved as in the existing SSS WDRs. As the Staff Report indicates, development and implementation of SSMPs by SSS WDRs enrollees has just been completed and these plans need to be fully implemented so their effectiveness can be properly identified. Further, it is recognized that dramatically changing SSMP requirements before full implementation will likely lead to confusion regarding the SSMP requirements among enrollees, the public, and Water Board staff.

12. Language describing SSMP requirements should be revised as follows (SSMP sections are listed in the order they appear in the proposed revisions to the SSS WDRs):

- *Organization* - Including names, email addresses, and telephone numbers for the staff described in paragraph (b) (ii) is excessive information and inappropriate in a public document. Only the position and phone number should be included.

- *Legal Authority* – Paragraph (c) (v) should be revised to read: "Restrict, condition or prohibit new connections under certain conditions." In addition, Paragraph (c) (vi) indicates that agencies must have legal authority to "limit the discharge of roots…" It is not clear if this phrase is intended to refer to limiting root intrusion (which would be covered by good standard specifications), or to limiting the illicit discharge of debris including cut roots (which is already included in paragraph (c) (i)). In any case, the word "roots" should be removed from this paragraph.

- *Operations and Maintenance Program*
  - *Map* - Updating sewer system maps to identify and include all backflow prevention devices would be too onerous as they are not owned by the agency; this requirement should be removed.

    Also, the last section of paragraph (d) (i) should be revised to read: "A map illustrating the current extent of the sewer system shall be included in the SSMP or in

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a GIS." Also, this requirement needs to be clarified. It is not clear if "the current extent of the sewer system" refers to a one page map of the service area, or the entire detailed map. The latter would be impractical to include in the SSMP.

- *Rehabilitation and Replacement* - The third sentence in paragraph (d) (iii) should be revised to read: "Rehabilitation and replacement shall focus on sewer pipes that are at risk of collapse or prone to more frequent blockages due to pipe defects." It is not correct to imply that age alone is problematic. We know that it does not, nor is it correct to imply 'aging' is the same as 'deteriorating'.

- *O&M and Sewer System Replacement Funding* – The first sentence in section (d) (vi) should be revised to read "The SSMP shall include budgets for routine sewer system operation and maintenance and for the capital improvement plan including proposed replacement of sewer system assets over time as determined by careful evaluation of condition of the system."

- *Design and Performance Provisions* – The addition of the phrase "all aspects of" in both paragraphs (i) and (ii) should be removed; requiring each agency to update their standards and specifications to cover every last possible minor detail of sanitary sewer system construction and inspections just to meet this requirement would create an unwarranted burden on staff. Also, the phrase is not necessary and is already implied.

- *FOG Control Program* – Proposed revisions to (g) (iii) would simultaneously require legal authority to prohibit FOG discharges to the system and to require FOG dischargers to implement measures to prevent SSOs and blockages caused by FOG. This revised language contradicts itself, first by indicating that FOG discharges are to be prohibited, and then by including requirements for FOG dischargers. Also, the language appears to apply to both residential and commercial sources of FOG, but fails to recognize that logistical challenges may outweigh the benefits of *requiring* best management practices for residential FOG sources. We request that this existing language be preserved: "This plan shall include the following as appropriate:...The legal authority to prohibit discharges to the system and identify measures to prevent SSOs and blockages caused by FOG."

- *Performance Targets and Program Modifications* – Progress towards improving sewer system performance and reducing impacts of SSOs is already described in the SSMP and will be adequately characterized by a review of SSO trends. Also, without specific guidance on how to develop these targets, the requirement is vague and offers no validation of success or failure. All references to performance targets should be removed from paragraphs (i) and (j).

- *Communication Program* – The proposed revisions to the SSS WDRs would require each agency to communicate with the public on an annual basis regarding the development, implementation, and performance of its SSMP. This specified timeframe suggests that an agency would send out a notice of some sort at a certain time each year, but would not apply to agencies that communicate information to the public primarily via their websites; online information is made available 24 hours a day. The original language should be retained as is.

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13. The four-year board re-certification requirement is excessive.

The proposed revisions to the SSS WDRs would also require each agency to bring its SSMP before its governing board for re-certification at a minimum every four years. This frequency is excessive considering that infrastructure projects typically occur over a longer timeframe. We request a re-certification every 5-10 years.

14. Notification requirements need to be clarified.

We support the Staff Report's indication that only Cal EMA would need to be notified when spills to surface water of any volume occur. However, Paragraph G.4 indicates that Enrollees are to provide immediate notification of SSOs to the local health officer or the local director of environmental health, contrary to the instructions indicated in Section A of the Monitoring and Reporting Program and the Staff Report. Please clarify that notification shall only to be made to Cal EMA, and indicate that Cal EMA will notify other agencies.

In summary, it is our view that significant proposed revisions to the SSS WDRs are premature and overly burdensome. Implementation of the existing permit has already successfully resulted in reduced impacts of SSOs on surface water. Additional improvements are expected as capital improvements identified under the current permit are completed. It would be wasteful of public funds to have invested significant resources in meeting the current requirements only to have them change before our current efforts have come to fruition. We believe that it would be more productive for the Water Board to focus on bringing all agencies into compliance with the current permit rather than initiating sweeping revisions that would apply to all agencies, regardless of compliance history or the effectiveness of current programs.

The Rancho California Water District hopes that the State Water Resources Control Board will take these comments under serious consideration.

Sincerely,

RANCHO CALIFORNIA WATER DISTRICT

Craig Elitharp, P.E.
Director of Operations & Maintenance

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