

May 14, 2001

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Mr. Matt St. John
North Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board
5550 Skyline Blvd. Suite A
Santa Rosa, CA 95403

Re: Reporting data on water quality of rivers

To the Board:

I welcome this opportunity to respond to your request for information regarding water quality from the public. I'd like to report my concerns on two specific issues:

- 1) Poor coordination between the Water Quality Board, the Environmental Health Department, and the State Parks Department in monitoring contamination problems.
- 2) Lack of a baseline water testing policy for coastal rivers outside Ft. Bragg city limits (specifically Virgin Creek, Caspar Creek). I'm not sure whether Ft. Bragg monitors Pudding Creek, another popular swimming and surfing spot.

Virgin Creek, just north of Ft. Bragg, flows directly into the most popular surfing spot in the Ft. Bragg area. It appears this creek could be (and smells like it is) contaminated by sewage at various times, primarily in the rainy season, as it flows into the ocean. Its stagnation in the summer months can also be a problem for small children who swim in the creek at Virgin Creek beach.

Last Dec. 27, signs had been posted at Virgin Creek to warn surfers of creek contamination. I waited to see when the warning would be lifted, but the signs sat there for weeks, so I called State Parks and spoke with Greg Pickard in mid-January. He said Parks had found a broken sewage pipe at the bridge at Virgin Creek and tested the water. The test was positive for coliform and nitrates, but because there was no baseline test data available, they could not determine to what extent their test levels of these contaminants were above normal. He could not be sure whether the fecal contamination was from the local waterfowl, or from sewage. Further, he said he had not removed the signs because neither the Health Department nor the Regional Water Quality Control Board had yet given him any feedback after State Parks had submitted its test results.

I'd also called the Environmental Health Department on January 14 and spoke with Jim Ehlers. I asked him about water testing, and was shocked to hear that no testing had been conducted through the years. He told me the Health Department has "no time,

manpower or money" to do the testing. He wished me "good luck" on trying to get testing done.

I contacted the RWOCB on January 15 to ask what could be done, and was told that the Board has no authority to direct "the County" in how to monitor the rivers' water quality, and that the Board conducts no testing.

On February 10, I went surfing at Caspar Beach, where the creek was flowing heavily into the ocean during rainy weather. The next day, I became sick with a sinus infection and was prescribed medication (sulfa drugs) to treat it. As I later asked other surfers about whether they'd encountered any sicknesses, some remarked that they also had had cases of sinusitis or ear infections immediately after surfing at Caspar or Pudding Creek.

Both Caspar and Virgin Creek are in close proximity to residential septic tanks and farm animals. Also, there is an RV campground at Caspar. During periods of heavy rain, it seems quite likely that contamination can flow into these rivers, yet there seems to be no available data to determine whether serious problems may exist.

So, as it stands, apparently no agency is monitoring water quality of these rivers that flow into surfing areas and are used as swimming spots by young children. Without baseline test data, how can the public's health be safeguarded? What about state laws mandating monitoring water quality—how can they be addressed without pertinent data?

I would appreciate the Board looking into establishing a policy of regular testing, ideally both in dry and wet seasons. Perhaps there could be a cooperative effort with State Parks (which has testing equipment available) and Ft. Bragg's Water Treatment Department to conduct these tests. Thank you for your attention to this matter of public health.

Sincerely,

C. Lynn Booth

Cc: Environmental Health Department
State Parks Department
Public Works Department, City of Ft. Bragg