

Water Board declares 26 Bay Area waterways 'trash-impaired'

By Hadley Leggett
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Fed up with Styrofoam cups, cigarette butts and plastic grocery bags clogging Bay Area waterways, a regional board on Wednesday declared 26 areas "trash-impaired," in violation of the federal Clean Water Act.

Pending final approval by the federal government, the decision by the San Francisco Bay Regional Water Quality Control Board will force cities and counties, including San Jose and Santa Clara County, to institute multimillion-dollar cleanup plans or face hefty fines.

"The trash problem has been understood and visible for decades," said David Lewis, executive director of Save the Bay, an environmental advocacy group that lobbied for the new listing. "But actions have not been taken to reduce the trash, so there have to be tougher regulations."

Although the water board voted 6-0 to list the creeks as "trash-impaired," some jurisdictions questioned the decision and worried about the cost of complying with the new regulations.

The designation "triggers all kinds of reports that require a lot of money and don't necessarily solve the problem," said Monday Lariz, executive director of the Stevens & Permanente Creeks Watershed Council.

No one denies that there's a trash problem in the Bay Area. Last year on Coastal Cleanup Day, volunteers pulled 125 tons of garbage out of the bay, including 15,000 plastic bags.

The trash flows from storm drains into local waterways, where it endangers wildlife and discourages recreation. Wind and currents ultimately push the garbage into a section of the Pacific Ocean called the "Great Pacific Garbage Patch," a floating island of refuse larger than the state of Texas. There's so much plastic in the water, Lewis said, "it's almost like a soup."

However, not everyone agrees on how to address the garbage problem.

If approved by the Environmental Protection Agency early next year, the new listing will require cities and counties to create detailed cleanup plans, but it won't provide funds to help pay for additional programs. Some worry the added bureaucracy will divert funds from projects already in place and make it hard to concentrate on the regions most affected by trash.

"It takes scarce resources and says, 'Look at everything.' We don't have the resources to do that, so we have to prioritize," said Adam Olivieri, program manager of the Santa Clara Valley Urban Runoff Pollution Prevention Program.

Preliminary reports estimate the new regulations will cost the city of San Jose \$11 million over five years, said Melody Tovar, deputy director of the city's Environmental Services Department. Steps to reduce trash production are likely to include public outreach and education, more street sweeping and more catch basins around storm drains, where street trash flows into waterways.

San Jose has already started a pilot program to try

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new storm drain filters, Tovar said. But so far, the city has only installed 90 of the new devices, and an additional 29,000 will probably be needed.

Installing catch basins across the entire Bay Area would cost an estimated \$130 million, Olivieri said, as well as \$13 million a year in maintenance.

"We recognize that trash in our creeks is a significant and complex problem," Tovar said. "And we understand that it affects the vibrancy of our city's creeks. But we're concerned about the expense."

Others raised concerns over the methods used to identify "trash-impaired" creeks, saying the technique overemphasized trash "hot spots" along the 11,000 miles of affected creeks.

"It isn't a perfect way to evaluate the streams," said Lariz, who has participated in trash assessments. "But it is a systemic way, and it's the best tool we have."

Before making a decision, the Water Quality Board held a public hearing and responded to more than 200 pages of written comments.

For anyone who wants to understand the meaning of "trash-impaired," Lewis suggested joining a creek cleanup and seeing the garbage piles firsthand. Trash in the ocean isn't just what falls overboard from boats, he said.

"It's things from every household and strip mall parking lot. Ketchup packets, tennis balls, plastic bottles and cans — it underscores that the trash is coming from all of us."

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To get involved

For more information or to participate in a creek cleanup, visit:

www.cleanacreek.org

www.saveSFbay.org/baytrash

www.spcwc.org

Petaluma Creek
Rindler Creek
Kirker Creek
Grayson Creek
San Pablo Creek
Baxter Creek
Cerrito Creek
Codornices Creek
Strawberry Creek
Sausal Creek
Damon Slough
San Leandro Creek
Old Alameda Creek
Silver Creek
Coyote Creek
Guadalupe Creek
San Tomas Aquino Creek
Saratoga Creek
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San Francisquito Creek
San Mateo Creek
Colma Creek
San Francisco Bay shoreline, central
San Francisco Bay shoreline, lower
Source: San Francisco Bay Regional Quality Control Board

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(L-R) Volunteers clean out trash and debris from a marshy creek near the MonTara Bay Community Center in San Pablo, Calif. on Saturday, Feb. 7, 2009. A small hand full of local residents participated in the cleanup. (Sherry LaVars/Staff) (SHERRY LAVARS)



(L-R) Volunteers Bob Van Bibber and Mister Phillips, both from the Montalvin Manor neighborhood clean out trash and debris from a marshy creek near the MonTara Bay Community Center in San Pablo, Calif. on Saturday, Feb. 7, 2009. A small hand full of residents from nearby helped out. (Sherry LaVars/Staff) (SHERRY LAVARS)



Mondy Lariz of San Jose collects toxic trash from Stevens Creek, during an emergency clean-up last spring. (Courtesy of Stevens & Perman)