

Article for West County Gazette

Clean Water Rapidly Disappearing

By Brenda Adelman

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In a national survey on planet biodiversity, it was determined that seven out of ten biologists believe that we are in the midst of a mass extinction of living beings. They rated biodiversity loss as a more serious environmental problem than the depletion of the ozone layer, global warming, and pollution, although these three together may contribute significantly to the crisis, which is occurring because of great damage to the natural systems that purify our air and water. Unlike five previous mass extinctions attributed to natural phenomena, it is believed to be caused by human activity.

In the Russian River area we are being required to immediately deal with the precipitous disappearance of Coho and Chinook salmon and Steelhead Trout, with the first on the verge of total collapse. The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) is overseeing Endangered Species Act implementation. They developed the Biological Opinion, which directs the Sonoma County Water Agency (SCWA) to make critical changes to our waterway, which NMFS believes is necessary to save the fish.

These proposed changes include a possible permanent lowering of flows, closing the river mouth at Jenner in summer (even though it would have a dire effect on harbor seals, an animal protected under the Marine Mammal Act, and also under the oversight of NMFS), and making significant habitat alterations to Dry Creek (or requiring the construction of a very expensive pipeline to get the water from Lake Sonoma down to the Russian River).

Everything in our environment is interconnected and all the environmental problems we have ignored in the past are coming to haunt us now. We can't divorce ourselves from them by denying they exist. We are in the midst of a major economic downturn, which is limiting our ability to access the funds needed to address the problem. For example, as a result of our failing State budget, all our local habitat restoration groups had most of their funding stopped while only partway through their projects.

The Water Agency is being asked by NMFS to make very expensive changes to their water supply system in order to protect the endangered fish. Some people may say "to heck with the fish", but it is important to realize that the fish are the "canary in the mine", whose loss emblemizes great damage to the ecosystem, which affects us all. Human beings derive great health benefits from the fish we eat, fisherman and restaurants and grocery stores derive economic benefit from

the fishing industry, and there are many other important reasons to save these species.

At a recent meeting, water contractors representing City water users recoiled at the prospect of as much as a 30% increase in water rates needed to address this problem. Where will they get this money at a time when local economies are starting to feel the brunt of fiscal cutbacks? We have now arrived at the point between the rock and the hard place. This coming year will see a great deal of conflict over this issue.

And there is another major concern. In order to protect our gradually diminishing clean water supplies we need to show more care and appreciation for the supplies we've got. We need to think of our water as gold and treat it accordingly. It is absolutely essential that we address the burgeoning pollution issue because there are 80,000 chemicals on the market that are turned into a chemical soup by every sewage treatment plant, including all the prescribed and over the counter drugs we ingest and all the personal care and cleaning products we use. We really don't know how all of that is affecting aquatic life and our drinking water supply. If our clean water supplies get polluted, what will we drink? We can't make new water.

It is true that current wastewater technology takes out many of the chemical pollutants. But of the 80,000 or so on the market, only 126 are regulated. So when the North Coast Regional Board tells us that current wastewater technology is safe and beneficial uses are protected, it is based on a dearth of information. We are especially concerned about this, because the State Water Board and the North Coast Regional Board are currently promoting new policy that will allow "low threat discharges" and "incidental runoff" of irrigated wastewater, at the time summer flows will be greatly diminished and impacts can be exacerbated by cumulative runoff incidents.

RRWPC believes this runoff proposal is being pushed through with inadequate anti-degradation analysis. We believe that they need to have much more information on the polluted contents of this treated wastewater before the City of Santa Rosa and other places are allowed to spread it around our environment with impunity. The Laguna de Santa Rosa is one of the most impaired water bodies on the North Coast, and irrigated and discharged wastewater is at least partially responsible. To loosen regulations even further before more is known about this chemical soup is a travesty.

It is much harder (and more expensive) to get rid of pollution once it's done its damage, than to stop it in the first place. The focus should be on conservation and fixing leaky pipes, not allowing summer discharge.

RRWPC is in the process of developing a letter to send the Regional Board about this issue. The deadline for comments is Jan. 29th. Please contact Brenda Adelman soon at rrwpc@comcast.net for more information.