

Article for Russian River Times

(RRWPC January Mailer Letter)

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By Brenda Adelman

Words have power to shape our attitudes and actions. Bureaucrats are very sensitive to public criticism, so they talk softly and choose their words carefully. For example, the stuff that goes down your toilet and goes through a treatment process used to be called “treated sewage”. Then, after awhile it was called “effluent” and after that, “wastewater”. Now it is called: “Recycled water” by all officials! Those latter words sound so benign; you can almost picture people drinking the stuff.

Many years ago, when the “treated sewage” got dumped in the river, the citizens were outraged. Now, the public is being lulled into accepting wastewater as being as clean as regular water. In fact, we can’t tell what clean water is anymore. In almost any river in the United States, the towns upstream dump on the ones downstream.

Now our State is having a water crisis. They need to maximize the water supply in any way they can. So the State’s goal is to increase recycled water use to one million acre feet by 2020, which is about 325 billion gallons. And all of the water providers are thrilled with the prospect. They lined up to support the State’s goal, with Santa Rosa one of the biggest cheerleaders! (You can go to the State Water Board’s website and look for comments on the Water Recycling Policy to check this out.)

There are other options. They can get more serious about conservation, especially in the case of excessive landscape irrigation; they can fix their leaky infrastructure pipes (water and wastewater); they can promote waterless toilets, etc. In many countries, where water supplies are far more limited, they have become much more creative about how to use very small amounts of water. We need to look to their example.

Irrigated wastewater sounds like a good reuse of what used to be considered an icky product. If used very carefully, in certain circumstances, it is a valid way to prevent water waste. The problem is how to control it so it doesn’t end up in our waterways in summer when many people recreate in the river or in our groundwater, which many people use as their primary drinking water source. It is likely, because of global warming and agency regulations, Russian River flows will diminish substantially in the coming years. It is critical that we don’t destroy water quality in the meantime.

What’s in the wastewater?

Wastewater is definitely not as clean as it looks. In its proposed Basin Plan Amendment to allow “low threat” discharges (another soothing term), the Regional Board is proposing to allow accidental irrigation discharges if they are “incidental” and “infrequent”. Unfortunately they don’t define these terms precisely, but will leave it to some future regulation to determine. Because of the vague terms used, down the road lawyers can make mincemeat of the regulation. Such discharges are now illegal.

These “low threat” discharges of wastewater contain many unregulated chemicals such as pharmaceuticals and personal care products whose toxicity is unknown. Many of these are believed to cause serious harm to the environment, to aquatic life, and human health. They have been found in waterways, in drinking water, and in the human body,

where some believe they have caused cancer and other serious diseases in adults, children, and pets, and may be the cause of diminishing and disappearing wildlife species. Also, there is a great deal of scientific information about antibiotic resistant pathogens that can get through the treatment system and wreck havoc with anyone coming in contact with them. This issue has not been addressed.

Many of these chemicals are endocrine disruptors and are believed to cause the feminization of male reproductive organs in many diverse species such as birds, alligators, fish, and amphibians, preventing them from reproducing effectively. The State should test for endocrine disruptors and hormones in wastewater and the policy should be suspended in areas testing positive for these constituents.

Incidental runoff may also have the unintended consequence of allowing lawn chemicals to run off into waterways. We are also concerned about the cumulative impacts of numerous "low threat" discharges occurring at the same time, especially if toxic chemicals have been applied to the irrigated area. Wastewater irrigation on land that has been treated with pesticides should be prohibited.

The Laguna de Santa Rosa, prime receiver of runoff discharges from Santa Rosa, Cotati, and Rohnert Park, is a severely impaired water body. The Ludwigia (an invasive plant) is a very serious pollutant that causes great harm and is exacerbated by nutrients contained in wastewater. We have taken pictures of this infestation at Stony Point Rd. near Rohnert Park Expressway and the plant entirely fills the channel. This Basin Plan Amendment should not be authorized until nutrient loads are fully identified and an analysis of potential nutrient contribution by irrigation runoff can also be characterized.

In order to protect the environment in the summer low flowing streams the following additions should be included in this Amendment before it moves forward:

- Monitoring of wastewater water quality should occur near the site and time of application to assure high water quality is maintained;
- A maximum numerical amount be defined for "incidental runoff";
- Setbacks from creeks should be required for wastewater irrigation, with much greater setbacks in proximity to impaired creeks
- No irrigation should be allowed on lawns that have been treated with pesticides, herbicides, soil amendments, fertilizers, etc.;
- That multiple violators of wastewater irrigation rules not be allowed to irrigate with wastewater for at least a year, if not cut off entirely;
- That it include a re-opener clause as new information about unregulated and other contaminants becomes available and new regulations are needed;

Finally, Santa Rosa is planning an expensive (\$150 million) wastewater irrigation program at the same time, in the name of conservation, they are pressuring developers to install low water use landscaping. The city is promoting low water use landscapes on the one hand, as they prepare for a wastewater irrigation program on the other.

RRWPC needs your help!

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We are also happy to announce that we now have a website. You can reach us at rrwpc.org The site currently contains our important 2008 writings. We also have PayPal available at the website now for those who prefer to send donations electronically.

Send an email by Jan. 29th to Lauren Clyde at LClyde@waterboards.ca.gov asking the Regional Board to withhold voting on this Amendment until the issues above are addressed. You can use the points in this letter as the basis for your message.

If someone put two glasses in front of you and one was marked "wastewater" and one marked "recycled water" would you think they were the same, especially when they looked alike?