

March, 2008

Dear Russian River Supporter:

New year opens with a bang...

- 2008 opened with a bang in terms of unexpected developments in West County wastewater issues (see below).
- The Regional Board is planning a Basin Plan Amendment next fall that could effectively end the summer wastewater discharge prohibition.
- The Board of Supervisors is in the midst of considering the final Water Resources Element and other General Plan issues.
- The City of Santa Rosa is getting ready to release environmental documents to justify placing direct discharges in the Russian River at either Healdsburg or Forestville.
- The wide-open Fifth District Supervisorial race is heating up, with nine candidates registered so far.

This mailer provides snippets of information on the most active of these issues, but you can also read our articles in the West County Gazette and Russian River Times.

West County Wastewater: new septic regulations on the way...

A wastewater tsunami exploded in mid-January. There were four intense meetings in three days, and sheer coincidence that they all happened around the same time.

On Monday, January 7th, the North Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board hosted a meeting for community activists, interested citizens, numerous Regional Board staff and County and State agency representatives. It was organized by Board member Bill Massey, who is helping to address concerns about anticipated new regulations in Assembly Bill 885, which will have a strong impact on the Russian River Area.

While we do not know yet exactly what the new regulations will include, we do know that septic systems within 600' of waterways will receive a great deal of scrutiny. Those water bodies that have been identified as impaired, especially for pathogens and nutrients, will be closely studied to determine whether septics within 600' are actually causing pollution problems. Any particular septic found to be causing problems will have to be repaired to meet legal guidelines. Communities are now beginning to study possible remedies to address these issues.

Three meetings bring major change...

On January 8th, the Board of Supervisors considered and voted to shut down the planned Monte Rio wastewater project that had been eight years in the making, because it was at least \$2.6 million dollars short with no additional funding in sight. The County had hit a brick wall in terms of funding problems, which is indicative of the times. While a majority of people in the community twice voted to tax themselves to pay for part of the sewer, there were many concerns that it was getting far too expensive for the number of hookups (final cost estimated at about \$20 million) and didn't even serve many of the properties having the worst pollution problems. Monte Rio property

owners are now aware that they have to address these issues in some other manner and will be exploring alternative and affordable solutions to the problem.

Another important meeting took place at the Camp Meeker Recreation and Park District. The main item on the agenda was a decision to certify the environmental impact report (EIR) on the \$22 million dollar pipeline project to the Russian River County Sanitation District (RRCSD). The problems with this project have been previously described.

The drama was intense. Everyone thought that the vote would be unanimous in favor of certification because Occidental County Sanitation District faced heavy fines by the Regional Water Board if they did not have a certified EIR by December, 2007. The prevailing idea was that the EIR could be certified, thereby getting Occidental off the hook, but that the project would not be built. At that price, no one wanted it. Yet at least two Board members felt the EIR was deficient in serious ways. Since one member couldn't vote because of a potential conflict of interest, the EIR was not certified.

What happened a few weeks later may be a first. Against the expressed preference of the Regional Board, and in effect negating the action by the Camp Meeker Recreation and Park District, the Board of Supervisors declared themselves the lead agency for the pipeline project and voted to certify the EIR, while simultaneously claiming that they had no intention of implementing the project (raw sewage pipeline to RRCSD). The Supervisors' certification may be an unprecedented use of the environmental review process and is probably not in keeping with the intent of the law. It is also a testament to the County's failure to resolve West County wastewater issues since at least 1995.

Regional Board's Role...

On January 9th RRWPC met with Regional Board staff. This was a to be a discussion on several issues of concern planned months in advance. We spent considerable time discussing the Occidental/Camp Meeker and Monte Rio's situation. After strongly supporting expansion of the stressed Guerneville system for many years, Regional Board staff now states they would like a separate local, affordable remedy for Occidental alone that utilizes land-based and alternative treatment systems. Occidental's system is working much better now since they recently rebuilt most of their collection system.

Furthermore, it has become clear that large centralized systems don't work well in our type of environment (steep slopes prone to slides, heavily wooded, flood plain, etc.) The costs are extremely high, and systems tend to need expensive and frequent maintenance, once put in place. Lengthy pipelines in slide prone areas are more likely to have infiltration and inflow problems and provide more opportunities to pollute. The Russian River County Sanitation District has received fines and penalties every year since 1996. It is almost impossible to build a totally reliable system in the flood plain.

RRWPC is hopeful that septic management districts can be established that would conduct regular monitoring, facilitate maintenance and repairs, and develop funding mechanisms to help people pay for needed improvements to their systems.

5th District Supervisorial race in full swing...

Nine candidates are thus far running for the open 5th District office. Current 5th District Supervisor Mike Reilly is retiring after twelve years. RRWPC has decided not to make any formal endorsement as a group, but we distributed two pages of questions on water and wastewater issues for their response. Four of the seven candidates (two declared recently) responded: Tom Lynch, Dan Kahane, Rue Furch, and Maddy Hirshfield. Two articles appear (Feb. & March) in the Russian River Times and the West County Gazette where Brenda Adelman describes the responses and gives her recommendations.

RRWPC needs your help!

RRWPC has many challenges before us in the coming year and we are currently in need of funding, since our coffers are very low. Please give as generously as you can, especially if you have not donated in awhile. The date next to your name represents your most recent donation according to our records. We hope to hear from you soon. Remember, we do not sell or loan our list to anyone. Also, we urge Russian River County Sanitation District ratepayers to send in their protest forms for the fee increase. If you didn't get one; this probably does not apply to you.

