

A mess beneath Morro Bay's pristine surface

By Anjali Jaiswal and Michelle Mehta, Natural Resources Defense Council
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Morro Bay's magnificent beauty obscures an uncomfortable truth. Our coastal waters contain partly treated sewage that poses an unacceptable risk to all who swim in them, including the threatened and iconic California sea otter.

Operating for two decades under a "waiver" that excuses it from meeting national standards for clean water, the Morro Bay/Cayucos wastewater treatment plant has dumped bacteria and other pollutants off our coast. Now, Morro Bay and Cayucos public officials want to give the plant nearly 10 more years to clean up its act.

The region's magnificent marine ecosystem may not be able to wait that long, and there's no reason it should.

Even the treatment plant's own staff say the cleanup can be done quicker, and other Central Coast communities have upgraded their plants in half the time. In fact, the law says sewage treatment upgrades must be done as fast as possible.

Ten years is an extremely long time to build anything. The Empire State Building went up in just over a year! A quicker upgrade would save taxpayers money and is sorely needed to deal with a rising volume of sewage.

Cleaning up the sewage off our coast is critical to ensuring the survival of the California sea otter, whose statewide population has dwindled to about 2,700. This sentinel species helps indicate the overall health of the ocean, and its threatened status suggests marine problems that go beyond its own struggle to recover.

Several studies have traced the otters' decline to infections from land-based pollution, which comes from two primary sources: urban runoff and sewage wastewater. This effluent includes pathogens, parasites, fecal bacteria and other contaminants that threaten marine life, endanger human health, degrade coastal habitats, cause beach closures and damage the local economy, which depends on a healthy ocean.

It's time to shed the dubious distinction of having one of the most antiquated sewage plants in California. Let's upgrade as fast as possible. Morro Bay and Cayucos officials should adopt a shorter timeline now, demonstrating to our communities that above bureaucratic convenience they value public safety, wildlife stewardship, fiscal responsibility and plain common sense.

If you want to voice your opinion about the upgrade, attend the Joint Powers Agreement meeting on Thursday evening, April 27, at the Morro Bay Community Center Multi-Purpose Room, 1001 Kennedy Way, Morro Bay. For more information, call 995-3290 or visit www.cayucosd.org/JPBOARDMEETINGS.htm.

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