

Sewage plant fix victory for otters

\$26 MILLION PROJECT TO HIKE SEWAGE BILLS BY 79% IN MORRO BAY

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Mercury News
San Jose Mercury News

Article Launched:06/09/2007 01:37:31 AM PDT

For environmentalists concerned about California's struggling sea otter population, it may be Public Enemy No.1.

The aging sewage plant, built in 1954, sits on the beach just north of the little town of Morro Bay in San Luis Obispo County. Every day, it dumps 1.2 million gallons of partially treated sewage - enough to fill 40 backyard swimming pools - into the ocean, half a mile off the beach into the habitat of dozens of endangered sea otters.

Now, environmentalists finally have their wish - to clean up the plant's act. On May 29, the Morro Bay City Council voted unanimously to upgrade the plant. The water coming out into the ocean will be 10 times cleaner - so clean, in fact, that the city may sell it for use at nearby golf courses and irrigation projects.

In recent years, federal studies have shown that more sea otters are dying and washing up sick off Morro Bay than any other place in the 300-mile range where California otters swim between Half Moon Bay and Santa Barbara. No connection has ever been proved between the plant and the ailing otters. But suspicious environmentalists have pushed for four years to modernize it anyway.

"We are very pleased. With one vote they went from a Model T to a Cadillac - no, wait, a Prius," said Anjali Jaiswal, an attorney with the Natural Resources Defense Council, who has advocated for the upgrade.

The \$26 million modernization project will be completed in six years, after funding is raised and extensive engineering and environmental studies are completed.

Bruce Keogh, wastewater division manager for Morro Bay, said the upgrade will require an increase in sewage bills from \$19 to \$34 a month for the 14,000 people in Morro Bay and Cayucos, a small town five miles north.

He and other city leaders in a town known for its fishing fleet and Morro Rock, a natural landmark off Highway 1, say they have been unfairly linked to otter problems.

"People should let good science speak. The environmental groups can speculate until the cows come home," Keogh said. "But the reality is there is no science that links our discharge to otter deaths. And if you look at the otter count, the population is up. Let the science speak."

Clean Water Act

The plant has been of concern to otter biologists and environmental groups up and down the state's coast, however, because otters seen in Half Moon Bay, Santa Cruz, Monterey or other towns can swim hundreds of miles and come in contact with its effluent.

Of 40 wastewater plants that discharge treated sewage into the ocean off the California coast, only four still do not meet standards required in 1977 under the federal Clean Water Act. The four are Morro Bay, San Diego, Orange County and Goleta, a town of 55,000 south of Santa Barbara. Two of those, Orange County and Goleta, already have approved upgrades.

Treating sewage more thoroughly before it is released into the ocean reduces the risk of parasites, viruses, bacteria, heavy metals and other pollutants getting into the ocean.

In 2004, researchers from the University of California-Davis hung mussels off a buoy where the sewage plant's outfall pipe ends near Atascadero State Beach.

Patricia Conrad, a UC-Davis professor of parasitology, reported that of 120 mussels studied, none showed traces of *Toxoplasma gondii*, a parasite found in cat feces that has infected otters in high numbers around Morro Bay and other parts of the coast, weakening their immune systems and killing many.

On Friday, Conrad praised the upgrade.

"I think it is excellent news," she said, "not just because it will be beneficial to sea otters, but also because it will be beneficial to all marine life and to humans."

Conrad said that lab tests for *Toxoplasma* are not sensitive enough yet to ensure that none of the parasites are present when a negative reading occurs.

"It's not just about *Toxoplasma*," she said. "There are other disease-causing agents that hurt sea otters. Those are the ones that are going to be reduced because of this."

Possoms and pets

Some marine biologists have theorized that runoff from land may be transporting diseases from pets, possums and other sources to sea otters. Others have said that people flushing cat litter down the toilet might be sending parasites into the ocean.

A study by state Fish and Game biologists in 2002 found that otters in the Morro Bay area were nine times as likely to be infected with *Toxoplasma* than otters elsewhere in California waters.

The state's sea otter population grew steadily from the 1970s, when laws protecting the animals took effect, through the 1990s, but had leveled off in recent years. This spring, however, a USGS count found 3,026 otters, a 12 percent increase from the previous year.

Steve Shimek, executive director of the Otter Project, an environmental group in Monterey, said the population is growing "in fits and starts." Otters, he said, face threats from disease and chemicals, such as contaminants in some boat paints.

How dirty?

Last year, Morro Bay's wastewater going into the ocean averaged 21 parts per million for total suspended solids, or sewage particles. By comparison, Santa Cruz's wastewater going into the ocean is 3 ppm, and San Jose's wastewater going into San Francisco Bay was 2 - the same number Morro Bay's will be when the plant upgrade is finished.

Environmentalists had threatened to sue if the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency or State Water Resources Control Board granted Morro Bay another waiver from the Clean Water Act, as the agencies had done on five-year timetables before. The reason: Federal law says such waivers can only be granted if wildlife in the ocean is healthy, and they planned to argue the otters were not and the burden of proof is on Morro Bay.

"We have faith that wildlife will survive better in a healthy ocean," Shimek said.