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Proposed wastewater standards could triple rates

Sacramento Business Journal - by [Michael Shaw](#) Staff writer

Regional sewer rates could triple under much-stricter wastewater standards proposed by the state for the Sacramento area.

A threefold rate increase, business owners say, would cripple their companies, stall growth and eliminate jobs.

That rate hike is the worst-case scenario envisioned by the **Sacramento Regional County Sanitation District**, which is fighting a proposed discharge permit that would require more ammonia and pathogens to be removed from water discharged into the Sacramento River.

The required upgrades to treatment plants would cost \$2.06 billion, the district says, a cost that would be passed on to ratepayers.

The proposed changes result from a multiyear effort at the **Central Valley Regional Water Quality Control Board**, the state agency that has issued the discharge permit now up for public review. Board officials say the new requirements would protect human health and fish populations downstream.

But the local district claims those requirements go “beyond what is reasonable and necessary” under the federal Clean Water Act. It has been encouraging customers to comment on the proposed permit, hoping that the final ruling is less stringent.

“I’ve been telling everybody I can and raising holy hell about it,” said Johan Otto, president of **Carson Development** in Sacramento. “I heard their presentation, and it sent me through the roof.”

He is angry over estimates that hookup fees also would skyrocket, jumping from about \$15,000 to \$70,000 for a 1,000-square-foot restaurant. “That would’ve killed the last three deals I did,” Otto said.

But staff at the regional board who drafted the proposed permit say the local district is overestimating the technology costs of the new requirements, thus overestimating the potential financial impact to commercial users and homeowners.

“From what we’ve seen of their estimates, I’m not sure they need all the technology to meet the staff recommendation,” said Kenneth Landau, assistant executive officer at the Central Valley water board. Landau said opinions range widely on whether more stringent measures

are necessary to further curtail the ammonia and microbes released after sewage has been treated.

Local sanitation districts need new discharge permits every five years.

It received the tentative permit in early September, and officials were caught off guard, said Claudia Goss, a spokeswoman for the district.

“This doesn’t seem to be scientifically justified or coming from a public health standpoint,” she said. “It has not apparently been balanced against the cost.”

The district and the public, including commercial and residential customers, have until Oct. 8 to comment on the proposed permit. It then goes back for review by the Regional Water Quality Control Board, which has scheduled public hearings for December.

“With the kinds of numbers that are being thrown out, our rates will go sky high,” said Tim Wilbanks, purchasing manager at **Nor-Cal Beverage** in West Sacramento, one of the district’s largest industrial users. “We have every intention of writing a letter Ratepayers don’t want to be paying the second mortgage to the sewer company.”

The district is not leading a campaign against the proposed permit, Goss said, but it is holding forums to inform people about potential rate increases.

“We have a responsibility to ratepayers to let them know,” she said.

The Sacramento Regional County Sanitation District treats wastewater for 1.3 million people. A cost increase could hit the area’s industrial users the hardest — the region’s top 19 industrial users each were billed between \$43,000 and \$1.2 million from the district in 2008.

A typical homeowner bill could go from \$20 a month to \$61.75, the district claimed.

After being treated at a 4,500-acre complex south of the city, Sacramento’s wastewater gets released at the bottom of the Sacramento River south of Elk Grove.

Goss said district officials agree that more ammonia needs to be removed from the discharged water because ammonia depletes dissolved oxygen in the river — possibly killing off food supplies for fish downstream. But the district claims a far less stringent level of removal is needed. The district said treating the water would require using nitrogen to remove ammonia, and then removing those nitrates from the water at a cost of \$780 million.

Landau, the regional board executive, said ammonia attributable to Sacramento discharge has been found as far downstream as Suisun Bay near Concord.

“There is a whole range of opinion on whether this is damaging to the Delta,” Landau said. “There is some disagreement in the science itself and which are the most meaningful studies.”

Landau believes the discharge is not killing fish but it is affecting the fish’s food supply. The new permit also calls for more stringent controls on the release of cryptosporidia and giardia, two parasites that can make humans sick.

The district said using microfilters to trap the pathogens and ultraviolet light to kill them would cost an additional \$1.3 billion. The UV system would require significant electric power and have a large carbon footprint, Goss said.

Landau said the new requirements would exceed the standards sought at California’s beaches.

“In the staff opinion, coming in below that is not a good standard for sewer treatment discharge because, unlike at the beach, it is controllable,” he said. “This would go past that because the SRCSD should not increase the health risk to people.”

Goss countered that it doesn’t make sense to clean the discharge water to a standard that applies to beaches because people are not swimming at the point of discharge.

If the local district objects to the final permit, Goss said officials can appeal to the state water control board. Failing a favorable resolution, the district can then file suit.

Sacramento Regional County Sanitation District

Top commercial users:

- Franchise Tax Board
- American River College
- Kaiser Permanente Morse Avenue
- Cosumnes River College
- Mercy San Juan Medical Center
- Kaiser Permanente South Sacramento
- Cal Expo
- Sacramento County (various)
- Doubletree Hotel
- Methodist Hospital
- AT&T
- Hilton Sacramento Arden West
- Red Lion Hotel
- Arden Fair mall
- Marriott Hotel (Rancho Cordova)
- Arco Arena
- Holiday Inn Northeast
- DL Capital Center (Rancho Cordova)
- US Bureau of Indian Affairs

Top industrial users:

- Procter & Gamble
- Campbell Soup Supply Co.
- H.P. Hood LLC
- Huhtamaki Food Service Inc.
- Folsom State Prison
- Blue Diamond Growers
- Pepsi-Cola Bottling Co. Inc.
- Mission Industries
- Aramark Services Inc.
- Bryte Bend Water Treatment Plant
- Georgia Pacific
- Rio Cosumnes Correctional Center
- UC Davis Medical Center
- Vitafreze Frozen Confections
- Seven-Up Bottling Co. Inc.
- American Linen Supply
- Nor-Cal Beverage Co. Inc.
- Coca-Cola Bottling Co.
- Ameripride Uniform Services