

# Setting the Record Straight on Issues & Allegations Surrounding SRCSD's Draft Permit



## Overview

The Central Valley Regional Water Quality Control Board (Regional Board) has issued a draft permit that recommends very strict standards for the Sacramento Regional County Sanitation District's (SRCSD) wastewater treatment facility. If adopted, the permit will require the Sacramento region to pay for \$2 billion in additional treatment processes— even though the Regional Board cannot make a clear and compelling case that demonstrates real environmental benefits to justify this significant financial burden.

## The Issue

At issue are allegations that the ammonia in Sacramento's treated wastewater, which is discharged into the Sacramento River, is harming the Delta ecosystem, and that pathogen levels in the discharge now put river users at risk of getting sick – although compelling scientific data and Sacramento County health records do not bear this out.

Leading the charge in support of the Regional Board's stringent recommendations are the State Water Contractors (SWC), other water agencies that also pump water from the Delta and send it south, and their front group "Coalition for a Sustainable Delta." In a letter to the Regional Board about SRCSD's draft permit, some of the largest Delta water exporters contend that the \$2 billion cost to implement the Regional Board's recommendations, which will have a significant economic toll on the region, amounts to "literally pennies a day – less than the cost of a soda or cup of coffee."

Prevailing science indicates that the pumping operations are the primary culprit behind the Delta ecosystem decline, which is why some pumping limits have already been imposed. As long as the pumps are targeted as the most significant problem in the Delta, the responsible water agencies will be on the hook to mitigate the impacts, and the reliability of their water supply will be threatened. Moreover, plans for the proposed Peripheral Canal put the enormous intake pumps that will feed water into the canal to send it south very close to SRCSD's discharge point.

This is likely why, as a September 8, 2010, *Sacramento Bee* editorial pointed out, that "water agencies in Southern California and the San Joaquin Valley have attempted to make Sacramento's ammonia discharges the sole culprit in the (Delta's) ongoing decline." In truth, they have waged an aggressive misinformation campaign and applied a great deal of political pressure to achieve this goal. The editorial goes on to say these entities "have played fast and loose with the facts and science of the Delta."

## Setting the Record Straight on the Water Contractors' Claims

**MYTH:** *Tertiary treatment, as the Regional Board recommends for SRCSD, is widely used throughout the state and is "commonplace" in Southern California.*

**FACT:** *This is a clear case of "do what we say, not what we do."*

- Of the 30 largest municipal wastewater dischargers, located primarily in the L.A. basin, San Diego and the Bay Area, only eight use tertiary treatment.
- Only 30% of the wastewater generated by areas served by the State Water Contractors is treated to tertiary.
  - The 62 public wastewater treatment plants in the areas served by the State Water Contractors are permitted to discharge 2,720.3 million gallons per day (mgd) of treated effluent.
  - Of that volume only 838.1 mgd - or 30% - is treated to tertiary standards – the level the Regional Board recommends be used in Sacramento.
  - The rest (1,882.2 mgd) is treated to secondary – the same level now used in Sacramento. Standards in such secondary permits typically allow ten times more pathogens than what's proposed in SRCSD's draft permit.
- Of the 62 permits, only six contained ammonia limits that are at least as restrictive as those to be imposed on SRCSD.
- Two facilities in Southern California use primary treatment, which is less restrictive than secondary.

**MYTH: *Ammonia is the culprit behind Delta fish decline.***

**FACT: *Science tells a different story.***

The body of scientific data about ammonia's potential impact on Delta fish is inconclusive and often conflicting. Although the water contractors have funded several studies on ammonia to bolster their case, they have yet to find a "smoking gun." In fact, for every finding that may point to ammonia as a significant factor, there is another that contradicts it.

SRCS D acknowledges the need to reduce about half of the ammonia in its discharge to prevent any possibility for **future** low oxygen conditions in the river – because science supports it. SRCS D has proven that if sound science demonstrates an issue, it will be addressed with appropriate treatment. That said, too many questions about ammonia's impact on the Delta remain unanswered to draw any further definitive conclusions, as an independent expert panel convened by CalFED in 2009 concluded. However, the State has yet to conduct a comprehensive study of all suspected Delta stressors to determine their individual significance and how they relate to one another so that clear priorities can be determined and a well-founded Delta restoration plan developed.

Far more certainty exists around the impact of the pumps. A review of the extensive research done over the past 30 years on the pumping operations' impacts on fish indicates that the pumps have contributed to the loss of millions of fish during that time. Despite this compelling evidence, little has been done to mitigate these losses.

In August 2010, the State Water Resources Control Board declared that the amount of water pumped from the Delta would have to be cut in half to preserve vulnerable fish populations. The California Department of Fish & Game echoed those concerns several weeks later.

**MYTH: *SRCS D opposes ANY additional treatment, regardless of what it is.***

**FACT: *SRCS D insists that science – not political pressure – dictate policy and regulatory decisions.***

SRCS D acknowledges that half of the ammonia in its discharge should be removed because scientific data deems it necessary to prevent potential problems that could manifest in the future as a result of an increase in the region's size – and consequently its wastewater discharge.

SRCS D has a responsibility to its ratepayers to demand regulatory actions be proven to be necessary, reasonable and based on sound and compelling science, as the Clean Water Act and California Water Code dictate. The Regional Board's draft permit mandates removal of almost 100% of the ammonia and to adhere to pathogen standards that are 80 times more restrictive than the national USEPA criteria.

**MYTH: *The strict pathogen limits in the draft permit are necessary to protect public health.***

**FACT: *Sacramento ratepayers should not have to pay to fix a problem that does not exist.***

No demonstration of a public safety risk exists that must be "fixed" with tougher standards. In fact, in August 2010, Sacramento County Department of Health and Human Services, Division of Public Health report presents evidence that infection rates in Sacramento County are not higher than statewide rates and are not remarkable in any way. Public pools present a greater risk than the Sacramento River.

The Regional Board has proposed a risk threshold that is 80 times more stringent than national USEPA criteria for bathing beaches, which is used for all CA public beaches and which SRCS D comfortably meets. Imposing these new, very stringent requirements is without precedent, unreasonable and will not produce a meaningful benefit in the river.