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Big Basin park fined for dumping sewage

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BIG BASIN — Big Basin Redwoods State Park has been fined \$15,000 by the Regional Water Quality Control Board for illegally dumping sewage into Waddell Creek.

The sewage discharges, from an antiquated sewage plant at the popular camping and tourist spot outside Boulder Creek, have been estimated at 123,000 gallons over the past five years.

William Leonard, executive officer for the Regional Water Quality Control Board in San Luis Obispo, said the state Department of Parks and Recreation — which operates Big Basin — could have been fined \$838,850 because of the severity of the repeated violations.

Despite objections from a number of downstream residents last month, the Regional Water Quality Control Board gave park officials a temporary reprieve by not shutting operations down during the peak tourist season. However, the \$15,000 fine was recently imposed for the violations.

State parks officials will have a chance to respond to the Regional Water Quality Control Board on Sept. 8 in Salinas. Downstream residents are being urged to attend the hearing by Third District Supervisor Gary Patton, who represents Santa Cruz and the north coast. Patton said county supervisors are tired of the repeated violations and want an end to the sewage discharge. Patton is sched-

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uled to attend the hearing on behalf of the county.

Leonard said the Water Quality Control Board will have the option of reducing, increasing or even dropping the \$15,000 fine. "The rationale behind the fine is that we didn't want state parks to think we didn't consider this a serious matter," he said.

Bud Getty, district superintendent for the state Department of Parks and Recreation, called the \$15,000 fine an "attention-getter."

"But, the major attention-getter was the promise (by the Water Quality Control Board) to shut down the major part of the park if we didn't resolve the situation," he added.

Board members ordered Big Basin's sewage plant closed last month. Later, after residents had left, the board reconsidered, temporarily lifting the order until

another hearing could be held Sept. 8.

Getty said such a closure would have affected thousands of camp visitors, many of whom have reserved campsites for months. Big Basin annually draws some 1.3 million visitors a year. Leonard said it is the possible disruption of vacation plans that prompted the Water Quality Control Board to reconsider its order.

Residents like Karen Hahn and Karin Hinsen were incensed at the turnaround, to the point of "considering" a lawsuit of their own. That lawsuit is on hold, awaiting a new decision by the Water Quality Control Board.

"I don't think \$15,000 is really much of anything, it's a token fine," Hahn said. "But, if it helps get sewage out of the creek, we're all for it."

Getty acknowledges the park's sewage plant, built in 1936, has had a long history of problems with

breaks in lines and pumps. "It's like trying to keep a Model T running," he said. "It's just an old system."

Getty says the department has a \$500,000 program "in the works" to improve the sewage plant. However, more than \$1 million worth of work is needed.

"We're trying to do 20 percent of the sewer line a year," he said. "I'm hopeful the department is going to find the money and do a good job so we don't pollute."

Although nobody has ever been treated for any problems resulting from the spills, Getty concedes it could be dangerous, especially if children unknowingly played in the sewage.

Hahn called the spills "a real health hazard."

Said Hinsen: "They've ruined our whole summer."

The Sept. 8 hearing will begin at 9 a.m. at Salinas City Hall.