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BIG BASIN

# Big Basin gets reprieve in battle over sewage spills

**BIG BASIN** — Big Basin Redwoods State Park has been given yet another reprieve in a long-standing controversy concerning sewage spills into Waddell Creek originating from campers in the popular camping and tourist spot outside Boulder Creek.

Downstream residents are upset that the illegal sewage discharges — estimated by the state to be 123,000 gallons during the past five years — will probably continue sporadically this summer. One resident, Karen Hahn, said Saturday that residents will be "considering" a lawsuit against the state.

The state Water Quality Control Board, during a meeting Friday in San Luis Obispo, voted to temporarily lift their own previous order, issued earlier in the day, which would have partially shut down popular Big Basin Redwoods State Park this summer. Instead, the board agreed the park could stay open until it meets in Salinas Sept.

8.

But, at one point during the morning session, the board actually ruled to close the antiquated sewage plant at the park due to environmental hazards caused by numerous sewage spills.

Big Basin officials even began contacting those with camping reservations about the possibility of a closure. Officials were scrambling to find enough chemical toilets to keep the park open on a limited basis, said Bud Getty, district superintendent for the state Department of Parks and Recreation.

But that changed after lunch when the board met again, reconsidering their decision. Saying closure would be unfair to campers, they granted park officials a reprieve.

"Everything is copacetic now," Getty said. "It's a serious thing, but we're OK for now."

However, that's not what downstream residents are saying.

Around 70 persons live downstream in the Davenport area. Nine of them attended Friday's meeting in San Luis Obispo.

"It's a real health hazard," said Hahn. "I'm upset because the board changed their minds after lunch."

Neighbor Karin Hinsen added, "If they had closed it down, we would have a clean creek. Instead, they've ruined our whole summer. There's going to be black goo in the creek."

Hinsen said she and her family regularly swim in the creek. "I feel for the campers up there, but my responsibility is to my family. The state park is supposedly there to protect the environment, but it's the main polluter."

According to the state Water Quality Control Board, the sewage treatment plant has had a long history of problems. Breakage in the lines and pumps are common in the antiquated plant, which was built in 1936.

A state Water Quality Control Board report cited 31 incidents during the past five years that have resulted in 123,000 gallons of raw sewage being released into Waddell Creek. A shut-down order was originally instituted against state parks in 1980 for "discharge prohibitions." By 1984, the state had still failed to fully comply.

The report added that the state "continues to violate waste discharge requirements" when it comes to such things as effluent pH and fecal coliform counts.

According to Getty, Big Basin was already under orders to stop the sewage discharge before Friday's ruling.

"They said not to discharge in batches, but around the clock," he said. "We don't have staffing for that."

Currently the plant is staffed only certain times of the day when water is released into the stream.

"But the sewage we do treat is very high quality and because there is staffing whenever it is released, spills are controlled," Getty said.

Getty said to rebuild the plant would cost millions, and probably won't happen.

The problems are sporadic, according to Getty. Although nobody has ever been treated for any problems resulting from the spillages, he admits it could be dangerous, especially if children unknowingly played in the raw sewage.

"We had four spills in six days at one point and then we might not have another one for two weeks," Getty said. "A big spill during the summer probably dumps a thousand gallons, but most spills are about 100 gallons."

The plant has a capacity of 250,000 gallons of sewage per day, more than enough capacity for summer useage, Getty added.