

posts the Neary Lagoon outflow, the site of a longstanding debate.

Lagoon outflow source of debate

By JOHN ROBINSON

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SANTA CRUZ — A cluster of signs warning of contaminated water along the Neary Lagoon outlet on Cowell Beach, are due to fouled groundwater being pumped for construction, not lagoon water, city officials said Wednesday.

The signs mark a trickle of water flowing into the sea from the site of a concrete wall being constructed as part of the new Beach Street promenade. The wall footings are below sea level, and require constant pumping to enable the concrete to be poured and to cure.

"To build the wall we need to dewater that area," said Larry Erwin, city director of public works. "It's typical of any con-

struction when you are working below the water table."

The outfall has been the site of long, bruising battle between the city of Santa Cruz and environmentalists over the discharge of bacteria-contaminated water. The city had maintained there was no health risk from the discharge; ocean advocates disagreed. The city has agreed to permanently post the area, warning people to stay out of lagoon outflow water.

Once construction of the sea wall at the lagoon outlet is finished a permanent sign will be installed warning people not to touch any water flowing from the outlet due to contamination.

As recently as last month, children were playing in the lagoon

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outlet water prior to it being closed off.

The lagoon outlet is one of four beach sites in the county that county health officials consider contaminated year-round, including the San Lorenzo River mouth, Schwan Lake outfall, Aptos Creek and Soquel Creek.

The construction water, mainly seawater, is pumped through three-inch PVC pipe, to where it empties across the beach. Why the water contains slightly higher than acceptable levels of bacteria is unclear.

City officials, in compliance with state regulators have shut off the lagoon outflow, and are diverting the lagoon water through the Wastewater Treatment Plant. They said the construction water is not from the lagoon.

Sally Smith, chairwoman of the local chapter of the Surfrider Foundation, said she is concerned that any contaminated water is being allowed to flow into the ocean, but said the city has been working on solving the Neary Lagoon problems.

The lagoon, a catch basin for one-third of the city's street runoff, is polluted by high levels of bacteria caused by animal feces and other sources. Lagoon sediments also contain low levels of hazardous metals and other toxics.

A battle over the lagoon water, and how the city dealt with it, erupted after the city pumped nearly 1 million gallons of contaminated water into the sea in December while testing flood control pumps.

Fouled water from the lagoon also caused the closure of Main and

Cowell beaches three times prior to December's pump test. The closures prompted a class action lawsuit against the city on the behalf of ocean users, filed by Tery Trumbull, a San Jose attorney.

The suit is pending.

To avoid such beach closures, the city has agreed to temporarily divert the lagoon water into the

waste water treatment plant, during months of low flow.

According to John Mujares of the Regional Water Control Board, the city must submit a plan of how they will deal with the lagoon water permanently by June 13.

Erwin said the city has not yet decided on what options they will present to the water board.