

WATSONVILLE
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Watsonville faces extra sewer-plant costs

By STEVE STROTH

STAFF WRITER

It may cost Watsonville as much as \$200,000 a year more than planned to avoid an even more costly upgrading of the city's sewage plant to "secondary" treatment level.

City officials say some of the added costs are unnecessary, but admit there is little they can do about them.

Watsonville officials want a waiver from a federal requirement that all sewage plants have at least secondary (biological) treatment of waste being dumped into the ocean. The city currently has a primary (settling solids) treatment system and has plans to upgrade it to just below the secondary level.

To comply with strict Environmental Protection Agency requirements for the waiver, city officials said, they may have to pay the extra money for what one public works department staffer called "unnecessary" monitoring programs for the discharged sewage.

The monitoring programs would include frequent tests of the ocean area surrounding the city's discharge pipe. The tests, many of which are

costly and time-consuming, would gauge the presence of various pollutants.

No one will know just how much the monitoring programs will cost until the city's waiver application is completed and reviewed by the EPA in May. But judging from requirements placed on other cities seeking the same waiver, city officials believe Watsonville will probably end up spending more on monitoring programs than it expected and planned for.

Meanwhile, the EPA scientist who reviewed Watsonville's preliminary application two months ago said yesterday that cost is not a major consideration in determining how to police waste discharges into the ocean.

"We do not like (cost) to drive the design of the monitoring programs, but we do consider it," EPA scientist Janet Hashimoto said yesterday. She said EPA's first priority is to make sure pollutants are not being dumped into the ocean.

"We only ask for what we really need," she said.

In the end, the city will pay for the

expensive monitoring even if it is excessive because the waiver is crucial to its sewage treatment plans, Assistant Public Works Director Dave Koch said this morning. But there is still hope that the city can persuade EPA that some of the programs aren't necessary or don't need to be done as often, he said.

"Basically, we're in agreement with most of (the required tests). It's just how much of it we have to do that we question," Koch said. "We know it's going to be more than we want ideally."

Several months ago, Koch estimated the city could effectively monitor its discharge at a cost of about \$100,000 in the first year. Subsequent costs would depend on how much pollution, if any, was determined to have occurred.

But the major objective for Watsonville public works staffers is to get EPA to waive a requirement that the city upgrade its primary treatment to the more thorough secondary process, Koch said. That's what the waiver application is for.

Watsonville needs the waiver so it won't have to spend more than the \$34

million it has already committed to upgrade the current sewage treatment plant and extend the ocean outfall line, he said.

Koch said he became concerned about the high cost of EPA-mandated monitoring programs after attending a waiver hearing for the city of Goleta Sept. 6.

Goleta "got their waiver, but they have an expensive monitoring program that they have to do every year," Koch said.

Goleta's experience does not bode well for Watsonville, he said. It "sets a precedent of sorts" because the sewage plants of the two cities discharge about the same amount into the ocean. "Watsonville will be in a similar situation," he said.

Koch said Goleta officials objected to several programs required by EPA. They complained that several of the tests, which will cost that city \$300,000, were too intensive.

Koch said EPA officials required several tests which measure the same thing and still other tests for pollutants that are not produced in the treatment process. "Why look for it in the ocean if it isn't in your

effluent?" he asked.

The initial cost of monitoring could be reduced if results show no signs of certain pollutants, Koch said.

Though Goleta and Watsonville discharge roughly the same amount of waste, Goleta has a higher percentage of toxic pollutants in its sewage and Koch is hoping that will mean fewer tests will be required of Watsonville.

But the inflow of waste from food processors, which at times accounts for nearly half the local plant's daily sewage input, could necessitate other monitoring programs for Watsonville, EPA's Hashimoto said.

"Those types of things play an important part in the way we develop a monitoring program," she said.

Despite their concern about the threat of costly testing, city officials recognize they will save money in the long run by doing what EPA wants.

"The offsetting decrease in operational costs by not having to go to secondary treatment is more than twice what the cost of the monitoring programs will be," Koch said.

If Watsonville gets a waiver permit, it will be good for five years.

REFERENCE

WATSONVILLE
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