

Big Basin faces fine

By KEITH MURAOKA
Sentinel staff writer

SALINAS — Unless Big Basin Redwoods State Park stops spilling raw sewage into Waddell Creek by next summer, the California Parks and Recreation Department will be fined \$600,000 by another state agency — the Regional Water Quality Control Board.

The pending fine is one of the largest ever levied by a regional board, said Jim Lee, public information officer for the California Water Quality Control Board in Sacramento.

The whopping fine by the Central Coast Region Water Quality Control Board came on a 6-1 vote Friday during a day-long hearing in Salinas. The California Parks and Recreation Department, which operates Big Basin, has illegally spilled an estimated 123,000 gallons of raw sewage into Waddell Creek over the past five years from its antiquated sewage plant.

Richard Felty, regional director for the Parks and Recreation Department, decried the pending fine after the hearing, describing it as a "set-up to failure."

However, the outcome didn't entirely please the residents downstream of the popular camping and tourist spot outside Boulder Creek, or county supervisors Chairman Gary Patton. They favored an immediate shutdown of Big Basin to prevent the possibility of future sewage spills. The Santa Cruz

Please see BIG BASIN — A12

Big Basin/ State may fine itself over sewage

Continued from Page A1

Mountains park annually draws 1.3 million visitors.

The parks department's Felty cited consultants who have said it will take through September 1990 to fix Big Basin's sewage-treatment plant. "But they've set up a time schedule that we can't get to," he said. "I don't know how we'll make it. We're going to fix the plant. It's just that we're already on as tight a schedule as possible."

The water board gave state parks until June 30, 1990, to come into "substantial compliance" in regards to a proposed new sewage-treatment plant. They directed staff to return to the board's next meeting with an order to levy a \$600,000 civil penalty against the state if the Parks Department doesn't meet the June 30 deadline.

The Water Board also set a 15,000-gallon-a-day limit on sewage flow at Big Basin. The park averages 37,000 gallons a day. Since the peak summer season has just ended, the sewage limit shouldn't hamper campers for now.

However, Felty said that the restriction will hurt Big Basin next spring and early summer, noting, "I foresee some problems. We may only be able to partially open."

Patton, whose district includes the area downstream on Waddell Creek, was pleased with the pending fine. Earlier, he asked the water board to order the full \$838,850 fine

allowed under state law due to the severity of the water-quality violations.

But Patton expressed concern that the Water Board didn't go far enough in directing state parks to look at sewage-treatment alternatives, specifically regarding a state-of-the-art sewage plant that wouldn't rely on 24-hour surveillance by humans.

During the hearing, state parks District Superintendent Bud Getty told commissioners of the many sewage plant improvements the state has already made since the Water Board's July meeting. They include a 24-hour plant operator, and smaller sewage discharges 24 hours a day rather than larger ones within 8-10 hours.

Felty said \$267,000 has already been allocated for improvements to the sewage lines that cross Waddell Creek to prevent future leaks. He said the new sewage-plant is expected to cost \$492,000 for a total of \$759,000.

Residents such as Karen Hahn aren't convinced by state parks' promises. "It's all a bunch of empty words. We've heard it all before," she said.

And they have. State parks promised "full compliance" in 1984, but \$200,000 worth of improvements didn't end the sewage spills.