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New rules in place to reduce pollution from storm runoff

by [Community for a Clean Watershed](#) on Wednesday, September 15, 2010 at 1:47pm ·

The state has adopted new rules for Ventura County that position the county and its 10 cities on the leading edge of protecting water quality from stormwater pollution.

A new permit adopted by the Regional Water Quality Control Board on May 7 details the measures these agencies must take to protect water quality in local creeks, rivers and the ocean. The cities, county and Ventura County Watershed Protection District will implement new requirements to ensure that stormwater pollution is reduced to the "maximum extent practicable."

The permit is groundbreaking in both its content and development. There are stringent requirements that affect not only how the cities operate, but local businesses, construction sites and new development as well. Unique in the process of this permit is that some of the permit language came from a joint proposal by the local agencies and environmental groups.

Usually adversaries in such proceedings, they came together to reach common goals and obtain a permit that is reasonable and protective of water quality.

It is not new for municipal agencies in Ventura County to be considered leaders in protecting water quality. Before the first permit was adopted in 1992, the county and cities joined to pool resources and tackle the problem. The result was the Ventura Countywide Stormwater Quality Management Program.

That program was nationally recognized as the best municipal effort of its kind in 2003, when the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency awarded it a first-place Clean Water Act Recognition Award. The program continues to see success though annual reductions in illicit discharges, or illegal use of storm drains to dispose of waste. Additionally, Ventura County can boast of having the best beach water quality in Southern California, based on ocean bacteria monitoring done to protect surfers and swimmers.

The new permit will take this program to the next level. Improvements in public education about stormwater pollution and how to prevent it, as well as more inspections of businesses to ensure they are not polluting, are required. Scientific monitoring of water runoff from cities will be significantly expanded to help identify problems and solutions. Inspectors will examine the water in storm drains when it's not raining to catch polluters in the act. But the real revolutionary changes will be when new buildings are constructed.

As cities grow, they cover raw land with asphalt, concrete and rooftops. Water once able to soak into the ground and replenish groundwater supplies now runs over streets and sidewalks, picking up pollutants along its way to creeks, rivers and ultimately the ocean.

The new permit requires development projects to be better designed to allow water to primarily soak into the ground. This concept is called low-impact development, and it not only will reduce the amount of pollutants carried to the ocean but also reduce the peak flows that can affect stream banks and degrade habitat while increasing the local groundwater supply.

Cities will begin implementing most of the new conditions right away but are allowed time to address more complex issues. The permit will become fully effective in just over a year. Technical guidance for low-impact development still needs to be developed, along with workshops and training to help planners, developers and engineers understand the new regulations.

Obviously, the new permit with its strict requirements will increase the cost for all agencies. In fact, preliminary estimates indicate a doubling of costs. While still daunting, these costs are significantly better than those in early permit drafts.

Effective negotiations by local governments and environmental groups have led to a permit that will be more cost-effective, better protect local water quality and habitat, and keep Ventura County on the leading edge of stormwater quality.

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