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Los Angeles Times

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 23, 1993

County Agrees to Improve Sewage Treatment

■ **Environment:** Advanced treatment system will be built by 2002 at a \$400-million cost to ratepayers. Agreement caps 15-year tug of war.

By MARLA CONE
TIMES ENVIRONMENTAL WRITER

Becoming one of the last urban areas in the nation to step up its cleansing of sewage discharged into the ocean, Los Angeles County has agreed, after 15 years of battling federal law, to build a \$400-million advanced treatment system.

The county also agreed to pay \$2.7 million in penalties for violating the Clean Water Act, which requires that all sewage released into waterways receive secondary treatment, an advanced cleansing process to protect marine life.

Environmentalists from Heal the Bay and the Natural Resources Defense Council, who have been trying for years to persuade the county to comply, called the agreement a major step in cleaning up ocean waters off Southern California.

"This is the single largest source of pollution into Santa Monica Bay, and the bay is one of the most cherished and most used water resources in the entire country," said NRDC attorney Mitch Bernard. "The law requires a certain level of cleanliness, and that law has been violated by the county for a long time. So this is a huge victory for the citizens."

The Los Angeles County Sanitation Districts' 2 million ratepayers will pick up the tab, with each household paying \$200 over 20 years, plus \$5 to \$10 annually in operating expenses, said Bob Miele, head of technical services at the sanitation agency.

County sanitation officials say they argued so long and vigorously to get an exemption from the federal law, not only to save residents from the expense, but also because they believe the waste water already is sufficiently treated to protect the environment.

"This is \$400 million that will come out of the pockets of the public," Miele said. "If you had that much to spend in this community, would you spend it to take kids out of the ocean so we have a healthier environment for clams and other organisms, or would you spend it on health care or child care or drug prevention?"

The new treatment system, to be built at the county's sanitation plant in Carson, must be operating by July 1, 2002, or the county must pay another \$1 million fine.

The agreement culminates a lawsuit filed by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the Heal the Bay environmental organization, the Natural Resources Defense Council and the state's regional water board.

The settlement is not yet final, because the EPA and the water board have not officially signed off on it. But attorneys from both agencies have orally agreed and the sanitation board and two environmental groups signed the settlement earlier this month.

The penalties include \$300,000 to the federal government, \$200,000 to the state water board, \$1.2 million to improve Los Angeles County's program to collect household hazardous wastes and \$1 million for an expanded water reclamation program. The NRDC also gets \$200,000 to cover legal fees.

Under the agreement, all 330 million gallons of human and industrial waste that flow daily from the Carson sanitation plant into the ocean about a mile off the Palos Verdes Peninsula must undergo secondary treatment. Currently, 60% of the waste undergoes the treatment, which removes a larger proportion of organic matter, oily contaminants and toxic metals in the waste flushed by households and businesses.

The expanded treatment will eliminate half of the solid wastes, about 35 million pounds per year, that the county sanitation plant currently releases into the ocean, according to sanitation district data.

"Removing that much pollution will be a tremendous boon to marine life," said Mark Gold, staff scientist for Heal the Bay, based in Santa Monica.

"We fully expect the marine community off the Palos Verdes shelf to begin recovery within 10 to 20 years."

Miele said the sanitation agency hires researchers who study the impact on marine life, "and it has been, and still is, our opinion that our present discharge is absolutely

adequate to protect the environment. But it's no question that public opinion weighed in our decision to go to full secondary treatment."

Secondary treatment is a biological cleansing process that gobbles up and decomposes organic material and creates a sludge, which is hauled to a landfill instead of pumped into the ocean.

The technique generally makes the ocean cleaner for marine life, but is of little benefit to the health of humans because all sewage discharged from the plant already is disinfected to kill bacteria and viruses. Some bottom-dwelling marine creatures vanish from sites where partially treated waste is discharged, while others become more abundant.

The county has resisted expanding its waste water treatment since 1977, the deadline Congress set for municipalities to comply with the Clean Water Act. Los Angeles County applied for a special waiver in 1979, and the EPA took until 1990 to deny the request. Heal the Bay and the NRDC notified the county two years ago that they intended to sue, and the EPA stepped in to file the suit in January, 1992.

"There's no question citizens made this happen," said the NRDC's Bernard. "The fact that citizens initiated and pursued the process makes it an even bigger victory."

Los Angeles Times

Westside

THURSDAY

AUGUST 12, 1993

Cities May Face Lawsuits Over Storm Runoff

WESTSIDE

By GORDON DILLOW
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

A national environmental group has put two Westside cities on notice: Clean up your storm water, or else.

The Natural Resources Defense Council has notified Beverly Hills and Culver City that it will file lawsuits against them if they do not start complying with storm-water provisions of the federal Clean Water Act. Specifically, the group wants the cities to clean up "urban runoff" from lawns, roadways and other sources that flows untreated through storm drainage systems into Santa Monica Bay.

Also threatened with lawsuits were Hermosa Beach, El Segundo, Rancho Palos Verdes and Westlake Village, as well as Caltrans and 12 private industrial firms. The cities and firms have 60 days to respond to the complaints in the "notice of intent to sue" letters sent recently by the council.

"We hope this will wake them up," said Everett DeLano, a Natural Resources Defense Council attorney. "It really isn't that tough for them to comply. If they want to. There's just not that much they have to do. But we definitely aren't bluffing. We're after compliance."

Culver City Atty. Norm Herring said the city is "still evaluating" the council's complaint.

He said that the city has done its best to comply with regional runoff rules and takes seriously the group's concerns.

"If there's something else we can do to satisfy these folks, it's important to us," he said.

Herring suggested that miscommunication at the county level may be the root of the complaint. He noted that technical data sought by the group—such as the locations of possible hazardous materials and a map of Culver City's storm drainage system—was forwarded in 1990 to the Los Angeles County Department of Public Works, which oversees the region's storm drainage network. But whether the county made that information available to the council is unclear, Herring said.

Herring acknowledged that the city failed to provide some types of runoff data going back as far as 1980, but only because the city lacked the procedures for collecting it back then.

"They [the Natural Resources Defense Council] are procedurally correct in that some of the information has not been provided," Herring said. "But technically it is impossible [to provide] because it doesn't exist."

A Beverly Hills official said Tuesday that the complaints made about his city miss the mark.

Beverly Hills takes fastidious care of its streets and alleyways to keep trash and pollutants out of the county-owned storm drains, said Daniel Webster, director of public works.

The group's letter contended that the city failed to file reports pertaining to clean water requirements, a charge that Webster disputes. Some reports, such as the monthly rainfall report, were filed and not checked off by the county and other reports are in progress, he said.

Webster said that while the city plans to discuss the complaints with the group in a meeting facilitated by the county, he believes the "intent to sue" is an attempt to keep the pressure on cities to implement new programs rather than an evaluation of what the cities are doing now.

Caltrans attorney Anthony Ruffolo said his agency has "put a lot of effort" into complying with runoff regulations. "We're still studying this [notice of intent letter] to see where they're coming from."

DeLano said that even in dry weather, about 25 million gallons of untreated runoff flows into Santa Monica Bay every day, in a rainstorm, runoff can swell to 10 billion gallons a day. With that water come pesticides washed off lawns, motor oil from driveways, pet droppings, toxic heavy metals and tons of trash.

Storm drain systems should not be confused with municipal sewer systems, in which waste water is treated before being discharged. Except for material trapped in catch basins, usually everything in a storm drain system makes its way to the ocean without being treated.

DeLano said that if cities would inform their citizens and business people about the dangers of urban runoff—and back up the education with a little enforcement—it could go a long way toward making the runoff, and the ocean, cleaner.

"If I flush my radiator into the street, it's like pouring radiator fluid directly into the ocean," DeLano said. "People need to know that. The problem is that unless you're at the beach, it's out of sight, out of mind."

DeLano said some of the 19 cities and three other government entities in the Santa Monica Bay watershed have made progress in implementing regulations and programs to control urban runoff pollution, including the cities of Los Angeles and Santa Monica and Los Angeles County. But he said the cities that are being threatened with lawsuits either have not made enough progress or in some cases "haven't even begun to adopt the programs they're supposed to."

The Natural Resources Defense Council also wants cities to:

- Stencil signs near storm drain openings to discourage people from pouring motor oil or coolant, grass clippings, trash and other pollutants into the storm drain.

- Set up phone lines to receive reports of illegal storm drain dumping.

- Increase street sweeping.

- Create programs to encourage residents and business owners to keep their driveways and sidewalks clean, so when it rains the debris will not be swept into the storm drains.

- Provide regular cleaning of city catch basins.

- Set up inspection programs for auto shops, gas stations, restaurants and other businesses where debris and pollutants are common.

- Set up municipal disposal centers for used oil and other household hazardous wastes.

- Encourage water conservation.

Westside industrial firms that are accused by the council of not complying with water runoff regulations include: Blackhawk Oil Company in Culver City, Coast Enameling Company in Marina del Rey and Gebe Electronic Services Inc. in Los Angeles. Also named were South Bay companies Airco Gases, Allied Signal Casting, Fiberglass Production & Tooling Inc., Star Biochemicals, C.P. Hall Co. and Allied Signal Inc.

Heal the Bay, a Santa Monica-based environmental group, is joining the council in its threatened actions against the private firms, but not against the municipalities.

Don Phillips, plant manager at Allied Signal in El Segundo, which manufactures refrigerant products, said in response to the threatened lawsuit: "To our knowledge we are in compliance with all regulations."

He added, however, that the company is checking the regulations to make certain. Phillips said his company does not have any storm water runoff because "everything stays within the plant."

Dennis Signorovitch, a spokesman for Allied Signal, said the Natural Resources Defense Council erred in saying Allied Signal Casting in Torrance was not in compliance with the clean water regulations. The company, Signorovitch said, is covered by permits issued to its parent company.

Representatives of the other firms either declined comment on the threatened lawsuits or could not be reached for comment.

Los Angeles Times

SUNDAY, JULY 5, 1992

Scientists Say Pico-Kenter Drain Is Clean

■ **Environment:** Water in the befouled storm runoff channel is now being treated at a sewage plant.

COASTAL

By NANCY HILL-HOLTZMAN
TIMES STAFF WRITER

It's safe to go back in the water again.

To prove the point, a Heal the Bay scientist plunged into the surf at the mouth of the Pico-Kenter storm drain on a perfect beach day Thursday.

The swim was the finale of a celebration of the reopening of the ocean near a storm drain notorious for spewing filth into the sea.

"Today is a day of victory and celebration," said Adi Liberman, executive director of Heal the Bay.

The celebration was possible because, except during rainstorms, the befouled water is now being diverted from the storm drain to the Hyperion sewage plant where it is treated before it is released into the Pacific Ocean.

The success of the cleanup effort comes none too soon. About a week ago, the Santa Monica Bay Restoration Project announced the results of an earlier study that detected viruses confirming the presence of human feces in the water near the Pico-Kenter drain, as well as in two other Santa Monica Bay locations. Water from the drain has been directed to the Hyperion plant only since Memorial Day.

At a news conference on the sand at the end of Pico Boulevard, Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley and Santa Monica Mayor Ken Genser knocked down the signs that for almost two years have warned swimmers that it was unsafe to swim near the drain that carried contaminant-filled urban runoff into the sea. Los Angeles City Councilwoman Ruth Galanter and former Santa Monica Mayor Judy Abdo, who initiated the diversion project that made the reopening possible, also were on hand.

The diversion is a temporary measure, possible because water conservation in the region has made space available at Hyperion. Ultimately, Santa Monica will build a reclamation plant to deal with waste water, known as urban runoff.

Abdo said she recalled the day in December, 1990, when representatives of a surfers' group, the Free Pacific Assn., and from Heal the Bay came into her office and asked her to either clean up the Pico-Kenter storm drain or put a plug in it. She took them up on it.

In 1990, the water near the mouth of the drain was failing Heal the Bay's safety tests with a grade of "F."

On Thursday, the water made the honor roll.

SUNDAY
JUNE 21, 1992

New Sewer Line Brings Hope for a Cleaner Ocean

■ **Environment: A \$115-million replacement system promises to end the dumping of raw sewage into Santa Monica Bay.**

COASTAL

By BERNICE HIRABAYASHI
TIMES STAFF WRITER

Heal the Bay President Dorothy Green wore an especially large smile for the crowd of about 200 people gathered before her Thursday.

And she had good reason. After seven years of lobbying local wastewater authorities to raise standards for treating sewage, she was finally able to participate in the opening of a new sewer line that promises to end the dumping of raw sewage into Santa Monica Bay.

The North Outfall Replacement Sewer (NORS), which took 2½ years and \$115 million to build, will replace a badly deteriorated sewer built in the 1920s.

During rainstorms, the old sewer line routinely filled to the brim, forcing workers to divert raw sewage directly into the sea via Ballona Creek.

"The primary beneficiaries of the NORS system being built are the ocean and the people who use the ocean," said Green, whose environmental group has been fighting for more than a decade to clean up Santa Monica Bay. "There will no longer be those raw sewage spills into the bay."

Workers diverted the flow

from the old line earlier this month, sending about 100 million gallons a day into the new line, which extends from the edge of the Crenshaw District to the Hyperion Treatment Plant in Playa del Rey. The new line has a capacity to carry 500 million gallons a day.

In a ceremony Thursday near La Cienega Boulevard and Rodco Road, Los Angeles City Councilwoman Ruth Galanter officially opened the sewer by tossing several handfuls of rose petals and daisies into an opening through which spectators could see the rushing river of sewage.

"We were able to replace a very old and very sad sewer system," Galanter said. "I'm sure all of [my constituents] will be very grateful when this is done, . . . and some of those trucks go away and leave them alone."

Jeanne Breunig, who headed the citizens committee formed to address concerns of residents, said the noise and dust were a nuisance during construction of the eight-mile underground pipe.

But the city acted sensitively and responsibly, she said. Several families in Westchester who complained of loud noise from the underground excavation, for example, were moved to local hotels at city expense.

Heal the Bay galvanized public awareness and played a major role in the approval in 1985 of a \$3.4-billion plan to upgrade and expand the city's sprawling sewer system, said Bradley Smith, deputy engineer for the City of Los Angeles. The system serves the Westside, San Fernando Valley, Glendale and Burbank.

In 1986, the state regional water quality control board issued an emergency order requiring the city to complete the replacement pipeline by April 1993.

The line extends from the spot near La Cienega and Rodco to the Hyperion plant but will eventually become part of a 23-mile backbone stretching to the Los Angeles-Glendale treatment plant.

Workers will repair the old sewer line after it dries out, and it will be used as a backup for the new line.

As a result of the new projects, sewer bills across Los Angeles have been rising steadily, and cities that contract with Los Angeles for sewer services are not happy, Smith said.

Most cities pay their sewer tab out of fees collected from individual monthly sewer bills and from voter-approved bond issues designed to spread the costs out over time.

But many are demanding justification for the spiraling costs. Some cities, whether on purpose or not, are falling behind on payments. Los Angeles is suing El Segundo for not paying a single sewer bill in the past several years, Smith said. The bill now stands in excess of \$2 million.

But at Thursday's press conference, Felicia Marcus, president of the Los Angeles Board of Public Works, drew attention to past accomplishments, such as cleaning up sludge on the ocean floor, adding that people should feel their sewer bill dollars are being used well. This latest project, especially, will allow environmentalists and drought-watchers alike to rejoice during wet weather instead of fearing the sewage spills they often bring, she said.

"Now it can rain, and we don't have to feel guilty about it," she said.

Los Angeles Times

WESTSIDE, THURSDAY, DECEMBER 26, 1991

Good as Gold

■ **Environment:** Heal the Bay's staff scientist is credited with bringing credibility to efforts to clean up Santa Monica Bay.

SANTA MONICA

By JAMES RAINEY
TIMES STAFF WRITER

Mark Gold grew up around Santa Monica Bay. As a child, he learned to swim at Marina del Rey. Later, he hung out with friends at Will Rogers State Beach. By the time he got to high school, his family had moved from Beverly Hills to Malibu, where he spent endless summers body-surfing at a break the locals call "Little Dume."

At 28, Gold still lives for the ocean. But now, it's his job.

As a staff scientist for the environmental group Heal the Bay, he has become a key player in the effort to clean up Santa Monica Bay. Respected in the activist community and among government bureaucrats and waste dischargers, Gold has brought scientific rigor and credibility to lobbying on behalf of Los Angeles' reigning environmental cause.

In the process, he has helped define the sources and types of bay pollution—even forcing the closure of a popular Santa Monica Beach last year when he found sewage in a storm drain. Gold has also led the fight for increased warnings to keep the public out of polluted waters, reported on the failure of local cities to properly monitor the waste that flows into storm drains, and spurred negotiations for improved treatment of the sewage that the county discharges into the ocean off the Palos Verdes Peninsula.

"A lot of environmental groups can send someone to a hearing to read an impassioned letter," said Adi Liberman, Heal the Bay's executive director. "But Mark is there with expert testimony. No one else [in the local environmental community] can speak with the kind of authority and respect that he can."

Greg Wilson, chief of the Bays and Estuaries unit of the state Water Resources Control Board, agreed: "Mark brought Heal the Bay a lot of technical information and a strong contact in the scientific community."



LISA ROMERIN / Los Angeles Times

Mark Gold played a role in having signs installed at the Pico-Kenter drain.

Santa Monica-based Heal the Bay was born in 1985, at a time when there had been several major sewage spills and when bay pollution was becoming a hot political issue. Although it had only a handful of members, the group began to publicize Santa Monica Bay pollution and to fight a move by the city of Los Angeles to give less than full treatment to sewage

coming from the massive Hyperion Treatment Plant near El Segundo.

In 1987, a federal judge ordered the city of Los Angeles to stop dumping sewage sludge in the bay and to upgrade treatment at the Hyperion Plant. Heal the Bay was assigned by the court to monitor compliance with the landmark environ-

GOLD: Heal the Bay

mental agreement.

"It was like we won the first battle, but then the real war starts," recalled Felicia Marcus, a Heal the Bay founder who now helps control the sewage plant as president of the city's Board of Public Works. "We had to stay in their face to make sure it all got done."

It was Gold, working toward a doctorate at UCLA in Environmental Science and Engineering, who was chosen in 1988 to monitor the city's compliance and to act as Heal the Bay's staff scientist.

Gold had worked for a time for an environmental consulting firm. One of the projects he dealt with there proposed turning ecologically sensitive Ballona Lagoon in Venice into a marina.

"I thought to myself, 'What am I doing?'" Gold recalled. "It just never seemed right. I wasn't comfortable doing that kind of work for a massive development project."

"I had been close to Santa Monica Bay for a real long time," he said. "And I really wanted to apply what I was learning . . . to something I cared about."

Although they had increasing clout and succeeded in drawing public attention to pollution in the bay, Heal the Bay members in the early days sometimes tended toward hyperbole. Some "liked to shoot from the hip," Marcus conceded.

At a hearing before the Regional Water Quality Control Board just weeks before Gold was hired, for instance, two group members in white lab coats held aloft a smelly bottle of muck and declared that one-quarter of the underwater shelf off the Palos Verdes Peninsula was made of sewer sludge, observers recalled.

"There was no serious study to show that this was true," said one person familiar with the hearing, who asked not to be named. "It really damaged their credibility."

Heal the Bay founding president Dorothy Green did not recall that hearing at the Regional Water Quality Control Board and insisted the group has always been careful about the information it presented.

But Green said she hired Gold, "realizing that an organization is only as credible as the information it has."

Gold quickly expanded his work from oversight of the Hyperion improvements to a myriad of other projects, including some that are ongoing:

- A comprehensive analysis of water in a few notorious storm drains. When the study, under the auspices of the Santa Monica Bay Restoration Project, was released in June, 1990, it showed that the drain at the foot of Pico Boulevard had been polluted with sewage.

Signs and a rope with buoys were subsequently installed to warn swimmers to stay away from the water near the mouth of the storm drain, just south of Santa Monica Pier. Gold recently helped negotiate an agreement so the polluted storm water can be redirected to Hyperion for full treatment.

- A survey this year that showed local cities are woefully behind in complying with a federal program that requires them to measure and begin to control pollution that flows into storm drains.

- Negotiations, along with a lawyer from the Natural Resources Defense Council, that seek to end the dumping of partially treated sewage by the county Sanitation Districts into the bay.

- A study that quantified household hazardous wastes that people dump into the trash and the streets, which eventually find their way into storm drains and, thus, the ocean.

- A protocol, soon to be considered by the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors, that he helped write, instructing public officials in closing Santa Monica Bay beaches when spills endanger the public health.

Gold said he is "extremely well paid" at \$45,000 a year—even though he could make at least half again as much in the private sector—because he enjoys what he is doing. His work on storm drains also will be the basis for the dissertation that he hopes to complete by this summer.

Supporters say his growth as a speaker and an advocate has been even greater than as a scientist. "He came to us with no political skills," Green said. "He knew the issues, but he didn't know how to translate that into political action. Now he really directs that whole part of the organization."

Gold's impact has been so great that at least one other local environmental group, the Coalition for Clean Air, has been persuaded to hire its own staff scientist.

"Mark is one of the first guys I've met who is a Ph.D.-quality scientist, but who also knows how to speak English," said Tim Little, the clean air group's executive director. "We went out and tried to find a clone of him."

Even Jim Stahl, the assistant general manager of the Sanitation Districts, who has often been at odds with Gold in negotiations over the county's sewage treatment, said: "He has attempted at all times to bring science and scientific facts into the decision-making process, rather than perception. I think it's an improvement over how things were in the past."

Heal the Bay and Gold are not loved in all quarters, though. Some waste dischargers and public health officials said the group can still be too alarmist—not giving enough credit for improvements in sewage treatment and unduly fanning public concern about the health impacts of swimming in Santa Monica Bay.

"In every organization, there is an audience and an agenda," said one official, who asked not to be named.

Gold counters that he would rather err on the side of caution by warning the public when there are any signs of serious contamination.

He said one of his long-term goals is to help settle that long-running debate over the safety of swimming in the bay, particularly near storm drains. His drain studies already have laid the groundwork for a comprehensive health survey that would determine, once and for all, whether people are getting sick from swimming near the outlets.

"It's something I have been pushing for since I started working here," Gold said. "People still are asking, 'Is it safe to swim in Santa Monica Bay?' You have people so polarized on that issue."

In the meantime, Gold still lives near the ocean—in Santa Monica with his wife, Lisette Bauersachs, an environmental engineer whom he met in the UCLA program. And he still loves to swim in the bay.

"But I follow all our good advice," said Gold, ever the advocate. "Which is: Don't swim within two days of a storm and don't swim within 100 yards of a flowing storm drain."