

Sewer Spills in Corte Madera Creek

by Garril Page and Bruce Baum

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The spilling of sewage into waterways, public streets, and recreational areas is not a new issue. Years ago, it was commonplace to commingle storm waters and sewer overflows during storm flows. With passage of regulations intended to separate storm runoff from sewage, the picture has changed. For one thing, spills of raw sewage are not diluted by storm water.

For Marin, a conservative estimate of the average number of sewage spills is one every three days. These statistics for a period in early 2004 come from Marin County Environmental Health Services database and Ross Valley Sanitary District spill reports. For this past winter season, a sampling of records for Ross Valley indicates a 45,000 gallon spill into Corte Madera Creek, 27,000 gallons into the bay at Corte Madera Creek, 105,000 gallons into Corte Madera Creek/ San Anselmo Creek, 23,400 gallons into Sleepy Hollow Creek, as well as other smaller spills into the creeks.

Many sewers, both mains and laterals (the pipes going from the homes to the mains) are now 50 to 100 years old. Many are undersized, cracked and broken, allowing groundwater to infiltrate into lowlying segments of sewers in winter. This causes capacity problems both in the sewer mains and at treatment facilities at the Central Marin Sanitary Agency in San Rafael. Often the pipes overflow through manholes and clean-outs and spilled sewage flows into the creeks. Further, in low-lying areas near the bay, cracked pipes take in salt water, making the treated sewage unsuitable for irrigation use. Broken pipes also leak untreated sewage into soil and groundwater. Resolution of the issue is expensive and could be complicated. The Sanitary District just approved a \$1.2 million broken main replacement project to replace approximately 1,750 feet of under-sized, cracked, and broken mains on Butterfield Road in San Anselmo and the entrance to Sleepy Hollow.

The solution is complicated because an estimated 50% of the infiltration that causes the spillage comes from the lateral pipes, for which the homeowner is responsible. The District is considering the feasibility of providing grants to homeowners—perhaps up to \$2,000—to encourage a community effort for health and safety as well as to protect water quality.

There is a maze of regulatory bodies: EPA, Bay Regional Water Quality Control Board, Office of Emergency Services (state and local), Marin County Environmental Health Services, all trying to work with about two dozen local special districts that collect and/or treat sewage in Marin County. There are many opportunities for individual districts to slip between the cracks. Some of the new clean water laws are well-intentioned, but ill-defined or are unfunded mandates.

A group of residents is interested in forming a countywide coalition to include citizens and all relevant public agencies with the purpose of addressing these issues. With active participation, real progress could be made in solving the causes of our spills, plus improved risk prevention, and an educated citizenry. For further information contact Garril Page at 456-3933.

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