
Colorado River Basin Regional Water Quality Control Board

July 2, 2014

Dear Homeowner and/or Business owner:

As you may have heard, the Colorado River Basin Regional Water Board held its June 26, 2014, meeting in the Town's Community Center. During the meeting, the Water Board heard from Town residents and business representatives who generally support Hi-Desert Water District's proposed centralized sewage collection and treatment system, but are concerned about its cost and misinformation regarding the Colorado River Basin Water Board's Septic Tank Prohibition for the Town of Yucca Valley (Town). I am writing to update you regarding local and State efforts to ensure compliance with the Prohibition, as well as on what needs to be done and is being done to comply, and what would happen if responsible parties (e.g., private property and business owners) do not comply. First allow me to describe the problem and why the Regional Board adopted the Prohibition.

THE PROBLEM

The Town primarily relies on the underlying Warren Valley aquifer for its water supply, including drinking water, which is augmented by State Water Project water. Because the Town lacks a municipal wastewater collection and treatment system, most residents and businesses have historically used septic systems and subsurface disposal systems to treat and dispose of domestic and commercial wastewater. Domestic wastewater is generated from ordinary living processes, such as bathing, toilet flushing, laundry, dishwashing, etc. Commercial wastewater for the Town results from a variety of businesses, such as restaurants. Discharges of wastes from septic systems in the Town contain high levels of nitrates that have contaminated local groundwater. In addition, septic system discharges can also introduce pharmaceuticals and other harmful constituents into the groundwater. The rise in the number of septic systems in use in certain areas of the Town, combined with system failures due to age or inadequate maintenance, now presents **a significant threat to the community in regards to both water quality and public health**. Consequently, in May 2011 the Colorado River Basin Water Board imposed a Prohibition on septic tank discharges in the Town by adopting an amendment to its Water Quality Control Plan for the Colorado River Region Basin Plan (Basin Plan). The Prohibition provides that it will take place in three phases, with the first phase taking effect on May 19, 2016. Phases 2 and 3 take effect on May 19, 2019, and May 19, 2022, respectively. A description of each phase and copies of the Prohibition can be found at:

http://www.waterboards.ca.gov/coloradriver/water_issues/programs/basin_planning/docs/yucca_valley/yv_staff_rpt.pdf; and
http://www.waterboards.ca.gov/coloradriver/board_decisions/adopted_orders/resolutions/2011/res0004yucca_rev.pdf

THE SOLUTION

While there are several options to address the problem and property owners are free to choose the manner of complying with the Prohibition, including installing individual advanced on-site treatment systems and sewage package plants, **the Colorado River Basin Water Board believes that a centralized system for collection and treatment of wastewater is the environmentally superior and generally most cost-effective way to address this water quality challenge.** In addition, a centralized wastewater treatment system that provides sufficient treatment to permit recharge of the treated wastewater back into the Warren Aquifer through recharge spreading basins will assist in ensuring that the Town's short- and long-term water supply needs are met.

Because the above mentioned centralized wastewater reclamation system would provide significant environmental, cost, and water supply benefits, the Hi-Desert Water District (HDWD) has prepared a Sewer Master Plan, which calls for the construction of a centralized municipal sewage collection and wastewater treatment facility (WWTF) to assist the Town and its residents in complying with the Prohibition. We believe that the proposed WWTF would provide for sound and comprehensive management of precious local groundwater resources, ensure that groundwater and public health are protected, and enable residents and businesses in the Town to comply with the Prohibition. It would also ensure that groundwater is protected for future generations. **Therefore, the Colorado River Basin Water Board strongly supports the HDWD's proposed centralized sewage collection and treatment system.** A copy of a Board Resolution supporting the HDWD's project can be found at:

http://www.waterboards.ca.gov/coloradoriver/board_decisions/adopted_orders/orders/2007/res0074.pdf

PUBLIC CONCERNS

As I previously noted in this letter, Town residents are concerned about costs and misinformation. Regarding funding for the proposed centralized system, **I want to assure you that we are working diligently with our parent agency (the State Water Resources Control Board), our sister agency (the Department of Water Resources), the Town, and federal agencies to prioritize HDWD for financial assistance to help fund the project.** If a comprehensive solution to this problem, such as the one being proposed by HDWD, is not implemented, it is unlikely that the Town will receive financial assistance from the state. Further, while we are hopeful that these agencies can provide a substantial contribution to the funding of the centralized sewage collection and WWTF, we have to emphasize despite affordability issues, that **delaying implementation of this solution for addressing this serious nitrate contamination problem is not a viable option and will only result in increased compliance costs.**

ENFORCEMENT

The Prohibition is not going away, and its Phase 1 deadline is less than two years away. Delaying compliance with the Prohibition exposes residents and businesses that fail to comply with the Prohibition and continue to use their septic systems, to Colorado River Basin Water Board progressive enforcement. **Enforcement actions range from Notices of Violation and Cease and Desist Orders to monetary fines.** While no one wants this outcome, the Board must carry out its statutory mandate to protect water quality, and the use of enforcement tools may be necessary to ensure that mandate is fulfilled.

Please call Ms. Joan Stormo of our staff at (760) 776-8982 if you have any questions about this matter or would like to obtain copies of the Prohibition and/or its related documents.

Thank you for your attention to this important water quality concern.

Sincerely,



Robert E. Perdue
Executive Officer
Colorado River Basin
Regional Water Quality Control Board

JA/tab

cc: Regional Water Board Members
Hi-Desert Water District, 55439 Twentynine Palms Highway, Yucca Valley, CA 92284
Shane R. Stueckle, Deputy Town Manager, 57090 Twentynine Palms Highway, Yucca Valley, CA 92284
Jim Maughan, State Water Board, DFA