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ENVIRONMENT

Cities Exaggerate Cost of Water Cleanup

By DAVID S. BECKMAN, MARK GOLD and STEVE FLEISCHLI. David S. Beckman directs the Coastal Water Project in the Los Angeles office of the Natural Resources Defense Council; Mark Gold is the Executive Director of Heal the Bay; Steve Fleischli is the Execu

To hear the city of Lakewood tell it, new regulations aimed at controlling the county's No. 1 source of water pollution--urban runoff--could well end up raising property taxes by nearly \$1,300 per parcel of land. Meeting the new standards, the city's Web site says, will cost the region's cities some \$53 billion, an amount, the anonymous writer cautions, that is "four times higher than the combined property-tax revenues collected by all the cities in Los Angeles County each year."

The trouble with the city's Web site proclamations--and many other statements being made by cities and other entities trying to evade the new mandates--is that they're simply not true. Not even close.

Public policy debates usually involve disagreements about the facts, and they often are politicized. But the developing battle over urban runoff goes way beyond politics and honest disagreements. Some 50 cities--including Los Angeles--have joined forces with Los Angeles County and the Building Industry Assn. to block a crucial effort to clean up coastal waters off Southern California, and they're blatantly distorting facts in the process. The dispute stems from a long-established mandate of the federal Clean Water Act that requires cities to take steps to clean up the witches' brew of toxics, pesticides, bacteria, trash and other pollutants that accumulate on lawns and pavement. During rainstorms, this toxic mess is flushed into storm drains, which feed directly into rivers and flood channels and ultimately into the ocean. This runoff is nearly always toxic to aquatic life, and it is laden with germs that have been shown to sicken swimmers at beaches where it is discharged. It is the most substantial source of coastal water pollution in Southern California.

For 10 years, until state officials at the Regional Water Quality Control Board approved a new, tougher Clean Water Act plan in December 2001, cities were free to take half-steps without regard for the law's bottom line: demonstrating progress in reducing pollution. Whatever the conceptual merits or demerits of previous plans, one truth is inescapable: The plans failed, largely because cities never committed to measurable goals in pollution reduction.

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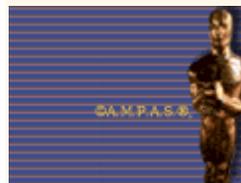
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After a decade of efforts to coax the cities into action, the regional water board decided last year to take more decisive steps. New rules were passed aimed at eliminating trash on beaches and along local waterways through a combination of increased public education and new devices that can keep trash from ever entering the flow. Clear standards were established for pollution reduction along all waterways in the region. No longer would cities, responsible under federal and state law for improving the region's water-quality problems, be given free rein to implement plans without having to prove that their efforts were actually improving water quality.

While some cities simply got busy trying to comply with the new regulations, more than 30 others, led by Signal Hill, formed an organization that calls itself by the Orwellian name of "Coalition for Practical Regulation." The group has filed legal appeals and motions seeking to overturn the new plan and is threatening to sue over efforts to reduce bacteria levels at local beaches.

And the coalition's efforts are not limited to fighting in the courts. Taking a cue from "court-packing" efforts in the 1930s, the coalition is sponsoring legislation in Sacramento that would radically reconfigure the regional water board, reconstituting it with members sympathetic to the group's goals. The bill, introduced last month by Assemblyman Edward Chavez (D-Industry), would dissolve the current board and allow local governments to handpick one-third of the new board.

But the willingness of local bureaucrats to prevaricate about the costs and implications of the new clean-water efforts is, ultimately, the most shameful element of this story. Lakewood's claim that the new plans will cost more than \$50 billion, with per-parcel assessments of \$1,300, is a grotesque exaggeration, based on a discredited 1998 study that estimated the costs of treating each drop of runoff to standards beyond those applied to sewage--something not required or even contemplated by the new plans.

Cleaning up the region's biggest source of water pollution and protecting public health will certainly not be cost free. And estimating those costs is, at best, approximate. But cities in South Orange County have estimated that a similar cleanup plan there, albeit for a smaller area, will add \$15 million a year to its current water-quality expenditures of \$7 million, a far cry from the tens of billions bandied about by Lakewood. And even the Orange County number is inflated by the fact that it incorporates programs like street sweeping, which serve purposes other than water-quality improvement.

Cities have also contended that under the new regulations they will face ceaseless and frivolous rounds of lawsuits from environmental groups determined to enforce the letter of the law. In fact, similar runoff-pollution prevention requirements have been in place for two to three years in Long Beach and in the cities of Ventura County without provoking lawsuits. The recalcitrance of cities not even attempting

compliance is far likelier to provoke litigation as environmental organizations grow increasingly exasperated. Southern Californians, polls show, highly value clean water, and large numbers of them are simply fed-up with the do-nothing bureaucratic gang that has hijacked clean-water policy at the local government level.

Debates are based on disagreements, but disagreements need not and should not be propelled by blatant misinformation. Making matters worse is that local residents, who largely fund city coffers, are unwittingly paying the bill for legal and lobbying campaigns designed to overturn policies designed to protect them. The public deserves far better. So, too, does the coastal environment that animates the Southern California lifestyle and propels a tourist and recreational economy worth far more than the real costs associated with maintaining it. Its time for Mayor James K. Hahn, the City Council and the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors to call off their appeals and rein in city officials who are attacking clean water in Southern California. If these regional policymakers actually show environmental leadership, they can play an instrumental role in setting a more constructive course toward clean water.

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