

# The Oakland Tribune

## Activists urge efforts to screen streams, drains

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Inside Bay Area

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San Francisco Bay has been protected from any number of threats, from microscopic pollutants to giant runway expansions. But one item flows virtually unchecked into the Bay every day, and that's trash.

Plastic bottles, styrofoam cups, soccer balls, coffee cups, plastic milk jugs, plastic oil cans, plastic bags, plastic buckets — it's all there, floating in the weeds, stuck in the branches, coating the bottom of the Bay.

It's waiting in the streets and the parking lots for the next rain to wash it into the storm drain, which likely drains into a creek, which carries it into the Bay and then, maybe, eventually, to the ocean.

Somewhere in the northern Pacific there's a section the size of Texas where bits of plastic outnumber plankton 6 to 1.

Activists say "no more": Agencies controlling the region's storm drains have for too long turned a blind eye to the trash their pipes are flushing into the region's waterways.

They want traps, screens,

booms and other devices installed to help keep that flotsam from the water. And there are signs regulators are starting to take notice.

"If it's not a mandate, then it's not a priority," said David Lewis, executive director of Save the Bay. "This is one place where we have huge strides to make."

This week the discussion begins before the Regional Water Quality Control Board on what steps local agencies must take to control the trash. The discussion is expected to last months but could end with some of the region's first rules for the permit controlling all municipal stormwater discharges into the Bay.

The region is already behind. Five years ago Los Angeles had the same discussion. State regulators concluded the total amount of trash they wanted to see in the region's waterways was zero and gave local agencies 10 years to hit the mark.

It's an audacious goal. The Los Angeles basin has at least 34,000 catch basins

collecting trash-filled storm runoff. Each one needs a mechanical trap needing to be cleaned at least twice a year. The whole effort is expected to cost \$2 billion to \$3 billion. Voters recently approved a \$500 million bond to get started.

In the Bay Area, where strict limits control mercury, copper, sediment, even oxygen flowing into the Bay, trash is covered in the mildest of language. Cities are urged to apply the best practices and pass anti-littering ordinances.

Cities fret that a mandate to do more would cost millions they don't have. Concord, for instance, estimates it would need \$9 million to remodel its 6,000 storm drains.

"If you're balancing keeping the tennis courts open or having more trash collection or even worse, (laying off) firefighters and public safety people, it's difficult," said Arleen Feng, monitoring coordinator for Alameda County's clean water program.

Trash, she added, "is definitely a cultural problem in the Bay Area." But there's no easy solution.

Just one spot in the Bay Area makes any effort at trash control: Lake Merritt, where nine years ago the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency declared trash to be a "pollutant of concern." Sixty-two storm drains empty into the lake. Four of them have vortex separators, where gravity-fed water swirls in around a screen en route to the Oakland lake, leaving the trash behind to be sucked out later by giant vacuum trucks.

**The Bay Area's creeks are getting trashed. Activists say agencies have long turned a blind eye to the trash in the region's waterways. [Check out the evidence](#), from citizen-gathered photographs, in an interactive map of the Bay Area's waterways. [multimedia]**

"We've been pushing for these since 1998," said Dick Bailey of the Lake Merritt Institute. For almost a decade, Bailey has weighed the amount of trash hauled from the lake. Wet months — December, January, February — run between 4,500 to 8,000 pounds a month. During the dry season that drops to 1,500 pounds a month.

Lewis at Save The Bay is pushing the EPA for a Baywide designation of trash as a pollutant of concern. His group is gathering photos of the problem from citizens using the Bay. So far the group has collected almost 100 shots from the North Bay to San Jose's Guadalupe River.

Each one shows reeds and water and trees clogged with plastic detritus.

Flipping through them last week, Athena Honore, a program associate at Save the Bay, said one thing was clear:

Current efforts "are not making a dent in the rafts of trash getting out into the Bay."

Save the Bay is interested in photos of trash in and around waterways throughout the San Francisco Bay watershed. Submission instructions are available at <http://www.savesfbay.org>.

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