Why the New Regional Storm Water Permit Matters

By David Gibson,

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Forty four years after the Clean Water Act was adopted, we have many achievements to be proud of in San Diego. Sewer spills are no longer accepted as routine and discharges from sewage and large industrial facilities are properly treated. Locally, drinking water is safe from contaminants that plague other municipalities. With the completion of clean-ups of contaminated sediments at the shipyards, San Diego Bay is cleaner and healthier today than it has been in over a century.

Not surprisingly, the rest of the world sees what we enjoy year round. According to the San Diego Tourism Authority, our region is a prime U.S. tourist destination, hosting 32 million visitors every year, generating more than $18 billion of business in the regional economy, and providing employment to some 160,000 residents. San Diego is home to one of the largest and finest craft beer communities in the world, dependent on a reliable, safe, clean supply of water. People come here to live, to recreate, and to do business, in part for the weather, but also in large part for the water. From our mountains to the sea, clean water fuels our economy.

Our work, however, is far from complete. Despite our progress, there are more than 450 water bodies listed as impaired in our region. Signage warns beach users to avoid contact with all ocean and bay waters for 3 days after every rain. Discharges containing metals and other constituents from over 800 small industrial facilities need more intensive oversight and controls. Channel erosion from poorly controlled storm drain runoff threatens our infrastructure, habitat, and private properties and the sediment from that erosion fills our storm water channels contributing to flooding in places like Grantville and Sorrento Valley. The only streams and rivers in urban areas not rated as “Poor” for ecological health are those rated as “Very Poor.” Storm water run-off, the single largest source of pollutants and pathogens, is the cause.

Although we recently enjoyed heavy local rains that eased our drought pains, very little was captured or stored for later use. Managing storm water is far more difficult than waste water. The City of San Diego, for example, has over 22,000 catch basins with over 7,000 outfalls that discharge storm water runoff in over 200 canyons, rivers, bays, and beaches. With such large and complicated storm water drainage systems, we have often missed opportunities to improve our communities, capture storm water for use, and prevent or mitigate water quality problems. Indeed, just for trash, it often seems that far more time and effort have been spent

by citizen volunteers cleaning up trash in rivers and beaches than has been spent on preventing trash from getting there.

Changing how we view, manage, and treat storm water and how we evaluate the outcomes and the true costs and benefits of that investment has been one of the top priorities of the San Diego Water Board. In November 2015, the San Diego Water Board completed the first region-wide permit to regulate storm water from South Orange and Riverside Counties to Imperial Beach. The regional permit builds on lessons learned from over 25 years of storm water management.

The permit is watershed based and was developed with the input of 39 municipalities within San Diego, Orange, and Riverside counties, and included environmental groups, the Building Industry Association, the Industrial Environmental Association, the US EPA, and many other interested persons. The cornerstone of the permit is the Watershed Water Quality Improvement Plan- the WQIP. The WQIP approaches storm water as a resource that is best managed on a watershed scale rather than city by city. It emphasizes collaborative, multi-agency pollution prevention efforts that complement the traditional regulatory tools and authority entrusted to the San Diego Water Board. It give us more opportunities to work together on efforts that restore the health of our water ways, provide additional water supply against future need, and protect the health and wellbeing of our communities and the tourism industry that powers our economy.

This is a permit in which the results will be measured in the environment itself and not in the size or number of bureaucratic reports or "bean counts." With this Regional Permit in place and my acceptance of the first 7 of 10 WQIPs, two years in the making, we are at last making progress towards safe, clean water, and a healthier community and economy.