

Your Watershed

By the Russian River Watershed Association

Isn't Clean Water Worth It?

You don't have to travel far in this part of Northern California to see what protecting our water quality means: a sparkling coastline, rivers we depend on for drinking water, irrigation and recreation. Local governments' business is to work for the public interest. As long as clean water is vitally connected to our economy, public health, the environment and our quality of life, then cities, counties, and utility districts must do what they can to keep the water clean. Yet there is another reason that local governments strive for clean water: It's the law.

The Clean Water Act is the primary federal law that governs water quality. Prior to its passage in 1972, water pollution across the country was widespread. Raw sewage was commonly piped directly to lakes, rivers and bays. Pressed by an alarmed public, Congress passed the Federal Water Pollution Control Act of 1972 (a.k.a the Clean Water Act) and set out to achieve two national goals: eliminate the discharge of untreated wastewater from municipal and industrial sources into the nation's waterways, and improve water quality to protect fishing and swimming.

To jumpstart the effort, the federal government provided billions of dollars for construction of wastewater treatment plants across the nation. It also established the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to develop water quality standards and enforce the reduction of pollutants into waterways by industries and municipalities.

Over the past 30 years, a myriad of regulating agencies at all levels have worked to implement the Clean Water Act as well as each state's own clean water laws. The California Environmental Protection Agency (Cal-EPA) develops and enforces the state's environmental protection laws, including those linked to clean water. The State Water Resources Control Board (SWRCB) regulates wastewater discharges to both surface water (rivers, ocean, etc.) and to groundwater (via land). Along with the SWRCB, each of the nine Regional Water Boards also regulate storm water discharges from construction, industrial, and municipal activities; discharges from irrigated agriculture; dredge and fill activities; and other activities that could degrade water quality.

At the receiving end of the regulations are local governments that must comply with the law to meet clean water goals. The regulators develop standards and provide guidance on such things as how clean drinking water is; how pure recycled water must be for use on crops, parks and landscaping; or how much water to release from dams during fish spawning season. This regulation greatly affects the way that municipalities operate their water, wastewater and storm drain systems. As water quality standards become more rigorous, local governments and utilities are compelled to look at increased public outreach and education, more legal authority, comprehensive land use controls, newer technologies and updated infrastructure. And this all costs money.

Who pays for all these water quality efforts?

While the majority of clean water regulations come from the federal and State government, most funding for drinking water and wastewater treatment comes from local ratepayers and taxpayers. The constant challenge for local governments and utilities is that they are under pressure to keep rates as low as possible, but need to collect enough revenue to operate and maintain the systems to ever-stringent water quality standards. Additionally, since the pumps, pipes and plants that make up our water and wastewater systems are aging, financial reserves must be built to eventually replace vital infrastructure. Complying with the law and providing clean water aren't free.

Regulating agencies, local governments and utilities, and ratepayers often seem at constant tension. For the regulators who must enforce the law, more work remains to be done: 40% of the nation's waterways still have an unacceptable level of pollutants. For local governments and utilities, meeting increasingly strict water quality standards strains already-lean resources. For ratepayers, paying even more for water and sewer is hard to do in these tough financial times.

Ultimately, we all want the same thing – clean water. The environmental progress achieved since the 1970's is due to the guidance and enforcement of regulatory agencies, the demands of citizen and watchdog groups, and the constant efforts of local governments and utility districts to protect the public interest and comply with the Clean Water Act. Isn't clean water worth it?

This article was authored by Eydie Tacata, a Management Analyst with the City of Rohnert Park on behalf of RRWA. RRWA (www.rrwatershed.org) is an association of local public agencies in the Russian River Watershed that have come together to coordinate regional programs for clean water, fisheries restoration, and watershed enhancement.