California Environmental Protection Agency

# NEWS RELEASE

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## Southern California Coastline Water Quality Meets Health Standards During Dry Months, But Polluted After Storms

State and Federal Agencies Increase Efforts to Battle Coastal Pollution Sources

WESTMINSTER, CALIFORNIA -- Southern California coastal waters fare well during dry months, but have high levels of bacteria after storms due to polluted runoff, according to three Regional Monitoring Shoreline Microbiology studies that were performed between August 1998 and February 2000. These studies were coordinated by the Southern California Coastal Water Research Project (SCCWRP) and featured the participation of 36 regulatory, municipal, and scientific organizations. This includes the California Environmental Protection Agency, State Water Resources Control Board (SWRCB), and the United States Environmental Protection Agency.

“These studies provide further evidence that polluted stormwater runoff is now the greatest threat to coastal water quality in California,” said Winston Hickox, secretary of the California Environmental Protection Agency. “Beach closures caused by polluted runoff are a prime example of the serious environmental problems that we are committed to addressing.

"Southern California has made tremendous progress cleaning up pollution from sewage treatment plants and industry," said Felicia Marcus, EPA regional administrator for the Pacific Southwest. "But this study shows sthat our job isn't finished. Storm water run-off is a serious problem needing immediate attention so that our beaches are safe all year-round."

The first two studies were conducted during dry weather conditions. The third study looked at coastal microbiological water quality after a major storm event. A report summarizing its findings will be released today by SCCWRP. The report shows that more than half of the Southern California shoreline fails to meet water quality standards after a storm.

The two earlier studies -- one in the summer of 1998 and another in the winter of 1999 -- found that water quality was consistently good along the Southern California shoreline, with 94% (summer) and 90% (winter) of the shoreline meeting California's bacterial standards. All three studies focused on bacterial water quality along the coast from Point Conception, California to Punta Banda, Mexico.

The third study was performed because the study in winter of 1999 did not capture any wet-weather conditions, even though it spanned a five-week period that traditionally represents some of the seasonally wettest times in Southern California. The third study only involved sampling for one day, after a heavy rainstorm, and therefore provides a "snapshot" of coastal water quality along the Southern California shoreline.

All three studies conclude that coastal waters near storm drains are of poor quality regardless of the weather. Additionally, this third study, which is the largest storm event shoreline microbiology study ever conducted along the Southern California coast, shows that nearly all of the ocean waters near freshwater outlets (storm drains) fail water quality tests after a storm.

Key findings of the Storm Event Study include:

- While the vast majority of beaches met state health standards during dry weather, 56% of the shoreline failed to meet water quality standards during wet weather;
- Ocean waters adjacent to actively flowing storm drains demonstrated poor water quality regardless of the weather, but following a rain event 90% of the shoreline adjacent to storm drains failed to meet acceptable water quality standards. Samples were taken near the mouth or within 100 yards of storm drains;
- Samples were analyzed for total and fecal coliform and enterococcus bacteria, three commonly used bacterial indicators of contamination. Of these indicator organisms, enterococcus levels exceeded water quality thresholds most frequently. This occurred in both dry and wet weather conditions.

For the storm study, researchers collected 254 total samples along the coastline including shoreline samples and samples collected near storm drain outlets. Of that number, 225 were collected in Southern California and the remaining 29 were collected in Baja California. Within California, 91 samples were collected from beaches and rocky shoreline and 134 samples were collected in front of, or within 100 yards of freshwater outlets.

The storm that triggered the sampling event dropped between 1.1 to 3 inches of rain throughout the study area. This is a large storm event for Southern California as the average precipitation is typically less than 0.5 inches per event.

A copy of the report, Southern California Bight 1998 Regional Monitoring Program: Storm Event Shoreline Microbiology is available on the Internet at:

**http://www.sccwrp.org/regional/98bight/98docs.htm**

With increased incidence of beach closures, governmental environmental professionals have increased their regulatory efforts to investigate and remedy the problem through a variety of measures, including the following: creation of pollution discharge plans to lessen the problem; implementation of a new law (CA AB538) that calls for the State Water Board to determine the source of bacteria in coastal waters; implementation of the State Water Board's new Non-point Source Pollution Prevention Program, which directs more than 20 state agencies and departments to initiate more than 60 comprehensive measures to combat polluted runoff; and implementation of a new stormwater mitigation program in Southern California.

"The coastline is a valued treasure, but ironically, is an endpoint for much of our polluted runoff," said Arthur G. Baggett, Jr., acting chair of the SWBCB. "And the shoreline study confirms how fragile this resource can be, especially after a heavy storm. Through these various regulatory programs, we hope to combat the problem head-on, to ensure that our beaches and coastal waters are fully protected."

California will spend an additional $5 million this fiscal year to fund 60 positions for the SWRCB's stormwater program, 40 of which will go directly to regional water boards dealing with southern California coastal water pollution issues. This is in addition to an existing $4.5 million in state funds and $500,000 in federal funds for the SWRCB stormwater program this year. Also, the SWRCB will administer more than $300 million to fund runoff control programs, through Proposition 12 and 13.

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