

Improving Water Quality in Carpinteria

By Darcy Aston, Project Clean Water, County of Santa Barbara

Why is there sometimes a bright yellow warning sign posted at Carpinteria Beach? Why isn't it always safe for your kids to play in Carpinteria Creek? Some people think there must be a major polluter dumping poison into the water, but this is not the case.

Creek and ocean water is unsafe for contact and the beach warnings are posted when high levels of bacteria are detected in the water. This bacteria comes from human and other animal sources, not from some major polluter, and enters the water from points all over the watershed. This is what's known as non-point source pollution. Other pollutants that enter our waterways in this fashion include soap from washing your car, that fertilizer that you put on your lawn right before it rained, or the oil from that leak in your car that you haven't gotten around to fixing yet.

Why does this happen? Because anything that flows into our streets and gutters runs into storm drains untreated. This runoff then makes it way to creeks and beaches, sometimes harming aquatic life and causing algae blooms or an oily sheen in the water. Everyone in the watershed is connected in this way, and so in a sense, the ocean begins on our streets with pollutants that flow from our everyday activities.

This type of pollution may seem minor, but when you add up all the people all over the watershed, doing things everyday that contribute to the mess, you can end up with some pretty dirty water in our creeks and ocean. The County's Project Clean Water was created to address the challenge of reducing nonpoint source pollution. In conjunction with the City of Carpinteria, Project Clean Water implements a number of programs to reduce water pollution and restore our creeks and beaches.

Project Clean Water (PCW) studied storm water runoff for the last few years to identify pollutants of concern. In addition to bacteria, our creeks carry fertilizers, pesticides, oil and grease, and heavy metals. PCW distributes information to residents and businesses to assist them in reducing the use of these pollutants, or preventing them from reaching the storm drains. Staff also visit local schools to teach kids about nonpoint source pollution, and what they can do to help protect the watershed. Because nonpoint source pollution comes from all of us, education is key in helping to reduce it.

Project Clean Water also insures that the County practices good housekeeping at its own facilities, and provides guidelines for construction practices to prevent runoff of sediment, concrete, and other building materials. PCW has also installed some pilot projects for removing pollutants from storm water. One of these projects is a storm drain separator that removes trash and other solids from a large storm drain on 6th Street in Carpinteria. The City will maintain this separator by removing the waste it collects to help protect water quality at the city beach.

There are also many community efforts to restore our creeks to a more natural condition. PCW staff participate in watershed planning and creek restoration projects with groups

like the Carpinteria Creek Watershed Coalition. Creeks with healthy native vegetation and stable, vegetated banks can actually absorb pollutants before they reach the waterway, so watershed restoration and water quality improvement go hand in hand.

The challenge of improving water quality in the creeks and ocean is not an easy one. The City and County implement programs that can help, but ultimately it comes down to all of us in the community making the effort to reduce water pollution. The problem begins on our streets, and so does the responsibility to create change.

If you'd like to find out more about what you can do to protect water quality, visit the Project Clean Water web site at www.countyofsb.org/project_cleanwater, or call 568-3546.